

Interviewee: Champion, Mary
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: Tell me a little bit ... your husband became acting president of FSU in 1965. What was your life like in 1964 and up to the time that he became acting president?

Champion: We lived on Vinnedge Ride, and we had built our house there. That was kind of fun, because up till that time we'd lived in an apartment on College Avenue. He came home one day and he said, "A friend of mine showed me these wonderful looking lots. Do you want to go see?" I said, "Sure!" I went out and said, "Let's buy one." He said, "I already have." So we built a house and we lived out there and we thoroughly enjoyed it.

Sellers: How much input did you have into the building of the house, the designing and things?

Champion: I had a good bit. I knew what I wanted, and we had a wonderful builder. With the lot like it was and the house, we had a nice playroom for the kids in the basement, and wonderful neighbors and yard. We both enjoyed entertaining, and we entertained all of our married life. So we did a lot there on Vinnedge.

Sellers: Part of your idea of building it, though, was that you had young children or growing children, so you arranged for the house to suit that?

Champion: Yes.

Sellers: How many children at the time?

Champion: Two.

Sellers: And about how old were they?

Champion: They were pre-school.

Sellers: There were schools close as they grew up?

Champion: Yes, they went to Sealey.

Sellers: And you were happy with that?

Champion: Very happy with that. Then one day I was working out in the yard, which I don't do very often – John did most of that. He came home and he said, “Guess what – I've got a new job.” I said, “What?” He said, “President.”

Sellers: Did you have any inkling or had he had any inkling that he had conveyed to you?

Champion: I think he may have had some idea, because my mom and dad were down visiting and we had an idea, because we were listening on the car radio. Our electricity was off, so we went out to the car to listen on the radio to see if anything came out, if he was appointed president.

Sellers: Why was the electricity off in the house?

Champion: I don't know. In that neighborhood it was just all off.

Sellers: Was that as exciting for you as it was for him?

Champion: It was; it was very exciting for me; I was thrilled.

Sellers: How old were the children at this time?

Champion: They were still very young – nine and seven.

Sellers: So you hadn't been in the house on Vinnedge Ride very long.

Champion: No.

Sellers: Did you sell that house?

Champion: We did.

Sellers: Did it break your heart?

Champion: Well, yes and no, because I loved the house over there.

Sellers: The president's house?

Champion: Yes. I did.

Sellers: Had you been in it?

Champion: I had been in it, yes. The Blackwells were very good friends of ours, and I had been in it ... well, since John had been with the university ever since we had moved to

Tallahassee, I had been in it several times.

Sellers: Had you ever been in it with the thought in mind that you might live there?

Champion: No, never.

Sellers: What was your first thought, when you thought about packing up and moving to that house?

Champion: How was I going to fill it up [laughs]?

Sellers: It was considerably larger than what you had been in?

Champion: Area-wise, but room-wise ... I guess we had four bedrooms at our other house and I think they had ... well, we had a guest bedroom, too. No, we didn't have but four bedrooms – three bedrooms upstairs and one down. So we had the same number of bedrooms, but space-wise, the living room was so much larger and the dining room over there.

Sellers: Did you bring your own furniture or did the university furnish it?

Champion: Both. We had a grand mix.

Sellers: Was there ever any concern that what you brought was going to get mixed in with what was there?

Champion: No.

Sellers: Was what was there comfortable to you?

Champion: Oh, yes. A lot of people worked with us. I should have gone back and looked at memory books and whatnot, but names are not with me. But I had a lot of people working with me and finding things that they would think that would fit, that maybe weren't in the house. But that along with what we had, and they mixed beautifully. The same style.

Sellers: Describe the house inside for me.

Champion: Oh, it was a wonderful house. It was especially wonderful for entertaining. Downstairs was a huge living room and a very large dining room, and a family dining room and kitchen. Then we had a guest wing which had a small den in the front and bedroom-bathroom back there. When we moved in, it had a porch all the way across the back side. We glassed that porch in and made it a TV room for the children, so they would have a place ... well, us too, I guess, as a den. Then we added a big patio out on the back, which we used a lot for entertaining. Upstairs were the master bedroom and two bedrooms and two baths – the kids had to share a

bath.

Sellers: When you say you ‘glassed in the porch’ and things, did the university pay for that or did you?

Champion: I’m sure they did. I don’t remember the details. Oh, and another thing that we did, we put sliding glass doors at the top of the steps, so this would give them a little den upstairs when we were entertaining, so they wouldn’t be back and forth.

Sellers: Had you had an upstairs in the house you were in on Vinnedge Ride?

Champion: No; it was one story.

Sellers: Was there any concern on your part about the children being up and down stairs all the time? Did they ever find that it was fun to run up and down stairs?

Champion: They did. And they found it was fun to go down the laundry chute, too.

Sellers: Where was the laundry chute?

Champion: It was from the upstairs down to the laundry room. I think that came out near the kitchen.

Sellers: You had help?

Champion: Oh, we had marvelous help, marvelous. Esther Yant was there from noon till after dinner. She was our cook and housekeeper. Then Isaiah came before breakfast; he was the chauffeur and butler, and also he did all inside work. But they were just fantastic.

Sellers: And they were university employees?

Champion: Yes. Then we had a babysitter that we had on our own. She was an older lady. And another thing that we had, you know there was a little house there on the property over to the side, and later on as the kids got older, a couple moved in there, the students ... I think he was a graduate student and she was there, and when we went out of town, they would move up to the big house and stay with the kids. It was wonderful, and they were just a fantastic couple. I still keep up with their daughter.

Sellers: Is your son or your daughter older?

Champion: My daughter.

Sellers: How did they feel about living in the “house on the hill?”

Champion: You know, I said that they were pre-school, but they weren't pre-school because Sally was in Sealey ... both of them were in Sealey. So they were in elementary school. Because that was the thing they hated – they hated moving from Sealey into a new school where they didn't know anybody at the university school.

Sellers: They went to the university school?

Champion: Yes. And they loved Sealey but soon adjusted.

Sellers: Was there no way for them to stay at Sealey?

Champion: No.

Sellers: Were the children able to bring their friends over after school?

Champion: Yes.

Sellers: Did it make them feel special, that their dad was president of the university and they lived in the president's house?

Champion: I don't know that they did. I think they felt more like they would have liked to have been in a neighborhood. They missed having the kids playing with them all the time. I think they enjoyed some of the privileges they had, but they missed some of the other privileges that they had.

Sellers: When you were entertaining as the president of the university, what did you do with the children? Were they hanging over the bannister, watching, or were they invited to become part of it? How did you deal with that?

Champion: No, they usually were not invited, especially when ... but hanging over the bannister reminded me of one time we were entertaining some very elegant dignitary (and cannot remember his name now), but his little pencil and piece of paper came down from upstairs, and it said, "Who are you?" And he wrote his name and sent it back and said, "Who are you?" And then another time we were entertaining ... I think it was the court ...

Sellers: The state supreme court?

Champion: Yes. And Johnny's little dog came flying through the dining room just as we were having dinner, and he was right after it. And he got him out, and I remember Judge Caldwell said, "Thank God for that!" So we had experiences when they [children] were not supposed to be. But most of the time for our formal entertaining, they were not.

Sellers: So they got used to the things that you had to do socially.

Champion: Right.

Sellers: As they got older ... how long were you in the house?

Champion: Four or five years; I'm not sure.

Sellers: So they didn't actually get to be teenagers while you were there.

Champion: No, and the Florida State students were absolutely fantastic to our kids. I mean, the boys in one of the dormitories brought Johnny a dog. They came over and built a tree house for him. And they always caroled us at Christmas. You know, they were just doing wonderful things. And there was a lot down there in the bottom and we told them they could play football down there if they wanted to, which they did. But they were just always doing something for us or for the children. I think one of the children had a Halloween party and they came and built all the houses, the witches' house, and things like that. They were always participating and doing things to help us.

Sellers: Were there any not-so-good things about living there?

Champion: Yes. When the time came when there were 'uprisings' and that was not very good. John and I were out of town and we were called, so our friends had to go over and get the children and take them to their house, because we didn't know what was going to go on.

Sellers: That was a bad time all over campus. Did the president do an ice cream social back then on the lawn?

Champion: Yes.

Sellers: How did you prepare for something like that, when you knew you were going to be inundated with students?

Champion: That again, just fantastic help. Just fantastic. Carolyn Krentzman was one that was just very helpful in so many ways. And Marie Williams. I don't know, there were several people, and I can't recall their names like I should be able to. But she was especially And we had a lot of entertaining for the kids, like we'd have Easter egg hunts for all the faculty children. Then we'd have big ... like the Halloween party and things. We did try to have ... for the children to have things, and to include the university children so that they could feel a part.

Sellers: Were there any university artifacts or precious pieces, oil paintings or anything like that that were included in the decor? Did you become sort of a showplace like the White House?

Champion: Yes, we did, and I cannot tell you what, but I know that there were several pieces

in the house ... not many. And another thing that was very fortunate for us (and I was trying to remember this the other night, and I'm not sure where they came from), but I think it was when [Governor Claude] Kirk came and they were redoing the [Governor's] mansion that they were not going to use the chandeliers up there. So we got the chandeliers for the living room and the entrance hall, which added tremendously to the house, in my opinion. I just thought they were a big asset.

Sellers: Did you ever entertain governors?

Champion: Yes. I was trying to think ... I don't even remember which governor ... I know Kirk was in part of the time we were there. But we know Burns and ... Farris Bryant, Askew, Collins. I was thinking of all the wonderful people that we met. Vice President and Mrs. Humphrey came down, and the children have got a picture that he signed with them and him. Ladybird [Johnson], and ... you know, it's all mixed up, when you meet all these people. But just so many outstanding people, and people that the university recognized, and then usually they would come to the house for a meal.

Sellers: Did you ever have times when you felt like as the president's wife, you had to keep up appearances, at the same time you would have liked to live anywhere else? Did you ever get fed up with all of that?

Champion: I don't think I did until the demonstration time came. I enjoyed it.

Sellers: What was it like? Did you feel like you were in a bunker? Could you go in and out and feel safe?

Champion: I just felt uncomfortable, uneasy, when John was going through turmoil, and that made me feel uncomfortable. But that was the only time that I didn't enjoy up there.

Sellers: I've talked to Patsy Palmer, and she tells the story of one night when some student had been locked out of his fraternity room or apartment or something, and somehow got into the president's home and just decided to go to sleep on the couch downstairs. Nobody knew he was there until they fell over his sneakers the next morning. Did you ever have anything like that?

Champion: No.

Sellers: Did you ever feel insecure there?

Champion: No, I didn't. We had wonderful security; people who would look after us. And you didn't feel like you needed it, the first part. You just felt so comfortable.

Sellers: You were there at a transition time, really, where we almost went from not locking

your doors to locking your doors. Did you drive yourself or did you have someone who drove you?

Champion: I drove myself most of the time, unless I was going somewhere where there would not be a place to park or something like that. Most of the time I would. Isaiah drove me some, though.

Sellers: Did you ever have to entertain as the president's wife at social occasions like teas?

Champion: Yes.

Sellers: You said you had really good help ... did you ever have a hand in planning those things, or did you just ...

Champion: Yes, they would always talk with me and we would work together. This is another funny thing that happened – we always had graduation reception in our house. After graduation all the families would come, and I looked forward to that. But this one time, John woke up the night before graduation and went into the bathroom and it was covered in water. Really high. So of course we called somebody to come and help, and they came up there. When we went downstairs, water was coming through the chandelier onto the dining room table, and just spilling off on the floor. Everything was just covered in water. And they came up and water vacuumed it and fixed it and patched up the ceiling, and we had graduation reception that afternoon. Nobody knew they were walking on a wet carpet. It was a mess, but we got through it, thank goodness.

Sellers: You had people looking out for you, and that was good.

Champion: Oh, just wonderful people.

Sellers: You've mentioned that as things got 'bad,' I know your husband was not happy with the position he was in and he was deciding whether he wanted to actually stay as president or not. Of course, living in the house that was becoming a target was not making you real happy. How did you decide ... I guess it was his decision, of course, to step down. But how did you feel? Were you torn about having to leave the house but at the same time knowing you should go?

Champion: With him in the situation he was in, I was glad.

Sellers: How did the move take place, physically? Did people from the university box you up?

Champion: They did.

Sellers: Did they help you find another residence, or were you on your own for that?

Champion: No, we found one. This was right when Killearn was new. Bill Cartee and his partner, J. T. Williams, were good friends with John. So Bill took us out and we were looking at houses, and we found one, the same builder that had built our house on Vinnedge.

Sellers: This was the same house that you were in until recently?

Champion: Yes, until I moved out here. I really did enjoy that, and it was a wonderful neighborhood.

Sellers: When you think back on the years that you lived in the president's house, do you have any 'wish you had done' or missed opportunities?

Champion: No, I don't. I was fixing to say the only thing is maybe I missed some time with the children that I would have had ...

Sellers: Because you were the president's wife?

Champion: Yes. Because of obligations. But then again, they had opportunities that they wouldn't have had. So I think it kind of balances.

Sellers: Have they ever mentioned or talked about over there years, the time that they lived in the president's house?

Champion: They talk about it, and I don't think it's either way. It was just a stage in life.

Sellers: They never got teased?

Champion: Not that I'm aware of. They may have and I didn't know it.

Sellers: Were they driven to school?

Champion: Yes.

Sellers: And back then, that would have been for convenience more than security?

Champion: Oh, yes. The fact is, I think a lot of times John probably took them on his way to the office.

Sellers: When you were living there ... that's a big area, and if the kids were home and they wanted ... it probably wasn't "why don't you go outside and play." I mean, there was an awful lot of outside, and it was on a very busy street. Was it fenced?

Champion: I think the back was fenced, and they usually played in the back.

Sellers: So you really didn't have too many worries about them bouncing golf balls across Tennessee Street and things like that [laughs].

Champion: [laughs] I don't think I did.

Sellers: Can you think of anything else that happened while you were in residence? Christmases there?

Champion: Oh, yes, we had wonderful Christmases there. John's family lived in Pine Mountain and mine in West Point, which were eighteen miles apart. A lot of times we would go up there. But I can remember Christmases in the big house. I know my parents came one Christmas, and I don't think John's ... John's mother may have come one Christmas. But a lot of times we did go up there because we could see all of the family, and that worked out good. But I've always been an occasion person. I like different holidays, and we tried to make a lot of them.

Sellers: When you were decorating for Christmas in the president's house, did you do your own decorating, or did the university come in and ...?

Champion: They came in and brought a tree, because we had a very, very large tree. I would usually tell them what I wanted done, but some of the places I couldn't get to. You know, I would do part of it and get somebody to do part of it.

Sellers: Did you always have fresh flowers?

Champion: Oh, that's another thing. That was always wonderful. We must have had ... I know we had a department where they grew flowers, and Henry Martin brought me fresh flowers every week, and I always had those. I've always loved flowers and I don't know anything about them, but I just love them and I got to know a lot more about arranging them and whatnot when we were over there, because we did have them. And I just loved that part of it. Then when we moved out to Killlearn, John had a beautiful garden. He had something blooming all the time. And I don't even know how to dig the hole, but I try.

Sellers: Why don't we wrap it up here and I'll send you the transcript. Now that I've gotten your memory juices going, you're probably going to be thinking of lots more things. When you get the transcript, you can add them in or we can follow up – or you can say you don't ever want to see this again.

Addendum:

Champion: I was having a big tea, and I was going to do it out under the grapevines. We had it all set up and everything, and it rained. But I decided we'd just do it anyway. It wasn't

raining very hard. And my mother was just mortified that I would go ahead and People didn't stay very long, but they came.

Sellers: You don't turn down a president's invitation. When you entertained, was it just for faculty or for visiting dignitaries?

Champion: Well, it was of a mixture. We'd do sometimes for faculty, sometimes for special people, sometimes just for my friends and town people. I guess most of the time it was something connected with the university.

Sellers: If you didn't want to do something connected with the university – was there any opportunity for just family privacy?

Champion: We had that. And a lot of times we had that. If our family were visiting, it would just be us ... well, at night, unless something else big was going on. And the family was very understanding of that.

Sellers: Were there any peculiarities of the layout of the house that caused you to gnash your teeth or ...?

Champion: Not really.

Sellers: The kitchen was easy to work with? You had modern updated equipment that you needed? Suppose you decided you wanted scrambled eggs and you were going to do it yourself – was it a problem?

Champion: No. But I guess I'd always done it.

Sellers: So you didn't have to ask someone to fix you scrambled eggs. Did you ever feel like there were too many people around, even though they were there to help you? Did you ever just wish to be in your own house without the help?

Champion: No.

Sellers: They were unobtrusive enough, and they fit in.

Champion: Yes. I'll stop now.