

AYER ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH:

Frances Gerety

Retired Copywriter, Creator of
" A Diamond is Forever.) "

N.W. AYER INC.

Interviewer: Howard Davis

HD We're going to get into De Beers pretty soon, but I was going to ask you just a little about your life...you were born in Philadelphia...

FG Yes.

HD And you went to Philadelphia schools?

FG Yes.

HD You moved to Wilmington...

FG For a couple of years...oh, my mother was Canadian.

HD Where did you go to college?

FG I didn't.

HD I thought you did because you're so beautifully educated.

FG Well, I finished high school in Canada, where you get your first year of college as part of high school, and I came back here to Philadelphia, and I went to night school at Charles Morris Wright School, I went to the University of Pennsylvania on Saturday mornings, taking every English course they had.

HD And where did you start work It wasn't at Ayer, was it?

FG No. I started to work when I was in high school.

HD As a writer?

FG No, it wasn't as a writer, though like everybody else I was going to write the Great American Novel. But I was attracted to advertising.

HD I think you started in a department store...

FG To pick up things, you know, write about...well, you know, there weren't even any jobs for clerks in department stores in those days.

HD That was in the Depression.

FG So my friend had the bright idea of...there was a little community paper started, and she knew the editor, and she got me a job writing a shopping column. This was when I was still in Canada. Anyway, I went out and I sold the advertising and wrote the ads, and made \$45 a week.

HD And what brought you back to Philadelphia?

FG Well, better times.

HD Then, when you came back, did you apply at Ayer?

FG No, I went to Ayer much later, in 1943, but I got a job with a local paper in the northeast part of Philadelphia, and I went to Charles Morris Wright School at night, and through them I got my first job as Advertising Manager of Steiger Walking Shoes... a store. Anyway, when that gave out, I got really a very educational job with a small agency down in Wilmington...we had all sorts of...all sorts of retail accounts. The amount of stuff we turned out is incredible. We had one store--a cheap, bargain basement kind of store--Liebowitz--and we got to be so well coordinated that you could write an ad with 40 or 50 or 60 items. I could write the copy and the agency head could do the layouts, and we could do it in an hour.

HD How did you get to Ayer?

FG I didn't want to come to Ayer. I'd applied to Ayer when I was just starting out, and they told me to go away and write a book or something...

HD Who was the copy chief when you came to Ayer?

FG Well, let me go into that.

HD All right, go ahead.

FG I intended to work at a job with a small agency in Philadelphia where I would do everything, you know.

HD As you had been doing.

FG Yes. And so I went to one little agency. I can't remember the name of the man at the agency--and he was so impressed with my work, he said "Well, I don't think you belong here, but before I give you an answer I want you to go to Ayer." So, anyway, he said go see George Cecil, and so I made a telephone call on the pay phone in Wilmington, and talked to a man by the name of Pierce Cummins, and he said, well, Mr. Cecil was out ill, and he would be glad to talk to me. But this man had told me to either talk to Cecil or to Batten, so I put another nickel in the phone and called Mr. Batten. And he said well, as a matter of fact, we just lost a woman copywriter...we might be very interested.

HD A woman--that's the way they were thinking then. A woman copywriter.

FG Well, there were 16 writers when I went there, only 3 women.

HD Now, this was the middle of the war...

FG Yes, it was in 1943. Women were just starting...anyway, Batten said we might very well be interested. Call Pierce Cummins. So, anyway, I came to see Pierce Cummins...the 4th of July...but anyway, when I arrived there Cummins was not there, but Cecil was there, so he always joked with me that when I first walked into his office, I said, "I'm your new copywriter."

HD What happened to Pierce Cummins?

FG He died of cancer.

HD Was he like an Associate Copy Director?

FG No, he was the Copy Director at that time.

HD Before Cecil and Slifer?

FG Slifer was a copywriter. Cummins then was the second man under Cecil...

HD What did you start work on?

FG The first one of consequence was Supplee. Sealtest.

HD Yes, well that's a longstanding account until it, you know, I think we severed with them a couple of years ago. So this was in '43. Now, we are celebrating 50 years--the De Beers account was in the house, but they hadn't come up with that famous line as yet? What was the De Beers advertising like at that time?

FG Beautiful. Betty Kidd was the supervisor, and set the tone of the copy. She started the copy...they did a lot of surveying. The survey was to find out the strength...really the weaknesses of the engagement ring tradition...a washing machine, or a new car, anything but an engagement ring...it was just absolutely money down the drain in those days...and so we spent a lot of time on surveys...

HD Meanwhile, all the advertising was engagement ring...

FG That's right.

HD There was nothing else at that point.

FG No there wasn't.

HD And Betty Kidd...she's a name I know about because in the archives there's a book that she wrote. Whatever became of her?

FG She died.

HD Listen, Frances...so you did other things, and when were you assigned to De Beers?

FG Well, not too long after I went there...I started to tell you a story about going to Ayer...Cummins...well, I had my samples, and they were ecstatic about my samples, particularly Betty Kidd. And they never let me out without offering me a job. I had no intention of taking a job with them...

HD You just walked out with the job.

FG Well, they had to consult among the people interviewed.

HD Eventually you were asked onto the De Beers account.

FG Well, yes, Betty...I don't think I was there too long...maybe six months or something...they asked me if I'd try my hand at writing an ad, and of course she supervised...I don't know how long she was there afterwards...maybe it was a couple of years, but not more than that, and she got to go with Lewis & Gilman. Meanwhile, I was writing the ads.

HD And, who was Gerry Lauck? I mean the senior account person. He was a partner of the agency. What kind of a man was he?

FG Well, he looked like Winston Churchill. He acted like Winston Churchill, and sometimes I think he thought he was Winston Churchill. He even had fits of depression...this was before my time...and this probably shouldn't even be on there. Go sit in Washington Square all day. This is hearsay. He was never like that when I met him. I remember the first time I met him...

HD Were you scared of him?

FG No, I guess I didn't have enough sense. I wasn't afraid of anybody, and so, but I had...Marcella Smith, was on the Yardley account, and Betty wanted her to work on something else, so she assigned me to the Yardley account...I'm not sure what it was, a campaign or one or two ads...and he was in New York, so Betty very nicely said, "Well, I think you should present them yourself, but I'd like to go with you." She was scared to death...so anyway, we sat down...and, of course, he was very fond of Marcella, who told Lauck, "Frances writes like an angel. She knows how to sell."

HD You always did, I believe.

FG So that's what...that was my introduction to Gerry Lauck, and he was quite a character.

HD Now, at that time did Shelly have an interest in the De Beers account? Later on he became Mr. De Beers, but was that only after Lauck left to retire?

FG: Well, Shelly might have worked with Lauck, but I don't remember that part...there were two schools--people were afraid of him, couldn't stand him, and people who loved him, and I was one of those...

HD Do you know, Frances, Brad Lynch and I interviewed Charlie Coiner...and he gave Lauck credit, really, for the great artists that were used on De Beers.

FG Well, I think he deserves full credit for that, and I think...you know, after we talked about it I had to think back...I don't know how much photography there was in advertising in those days, but it was commercial art, and so Gerry was the one who thought out the idea of doing the fine art. In fact, I don't know where it began, but I remember some of the early days when we had the Ford account. They used fine art in their advertising.

HD I know they did, and of course Cannon did, too. Do you remember the Steicher ads? Paul Darrow was your Art Director at that time...

FG Right, right.

HD What's the story about the "Diamond Is Forever"?

FG Well, Gerry Lauck had suggested that we have some way of signing the ads. Up until that point we just had diagrams.

HD Logo.

FG It wasn't a logo, just in very almost pinpoint type of...but we had nothing to identify it except the diamonds...

HD Oh, it was made of diamonds. I didn't understand there were diamonds in the design.

FG Oh, yes, we showed sizes, starting with half a carat. I don't remember...different sizes--I think there were four. You can check them on this...but anyway, it was an illustration of diamond sizes, but no signature to say it was diamond advertising, and so Gerry Lauck said to me, "Now I think we should have something that identifies this as diamond advertising, so I worked on the layouts, and I had the layouts on

my desk at home, and when I finished them up...some copy late at night...I discovered I'd forgotten to write this line, and so I just, you know, asked for help from above and wrote down "A Diamond Is Forever" and went to bed. And I didn't even read what I wrote, you know, so I got up in the morning and looked on my desk...

HD It was just a shock to you. You didn't...

FG A shock, it was a very nice line...you didn't jump up and down...

HD Did you remember having written it then, or not?

FG Well, I wrote down something, and I think one of the things was that...

HD Why did you have to work at night?

FG Well, because I'm a night owl...I don't come...

HD I thought there was a deadline, or something like that.

FG Well, I had sent the advertising to go out the next day...to South Africa...

HD Lauck was going to South Africa. So that's the reason...you like to work at night, too.

FG Well, I do. I come awake at bedtime. I should have worked on the night shift of a newspaper.

HD When you came into the office, who did you show it to?

FG I showed it to Gerry Lauck.

HD He was then in Philadelphia?

FG ...something like that...

HD Did he immediately like it?

FG Well, I mean everybody liked it...nobody jumped...

HD It wasn't any...

FG It wasn't that important...it was just a way to sign the advertising.

HD So that was in...

FG National Jeweler called me and wanted to know...well, I couldn't tell her. It might have been '46.

HD Oh, you'd been there for a couple of years...

FG '46 or '47...

HD I see, I see...right after the war...soon after the war...

FG I don't equate it with any figure of time...

HD It's considered one of the great lines in advertising.

FG I know it is, and I'm so glad that it is, but I think if you had to come up with a great line it would have been lost...because everybody would have written hundreds of lines, and they all would have been thrown away, like the Edsel.

HD Like the Edsel, right. Um, at that time was diamond advertising still largely engagement rings?

FG Later on we started some jewelry advertising, and there were all sorts of restrictions in those days...you couldn't show actual pieces.

HD You could not?

FG No, showing what was really for sale, and it had to do with whether the company was in the United States or not, and we were trying to keep the tax situation...

HD Yes, I know there's always...

FG A legal situation.

HD I know, I know.

FG And so, it was very difficult to do fashion advertising.

HD They must have found a way around it.

FG Well, I wrote a very interesting, perhaps controversial, campaign at the suggestion of Warner Shelly about a diamond wardrobe. It went into ecstasies about what you wore when, and you bought this this year and something else the next year, and you rounded it out with a necklace and a bracelet and earrings, and this and that and the other thing...and I got a lot of acclaim from advertising agents: Women's Wear Daily and like that, but I guess it was Mr. Hoving, the one that took over...was it Tiffany?

HD Tiffany, yes. Hoving, right.

FG Well, he hated it. I was going to meet Mr. Hoving one day, and he really ripped this up and down.

HD What was his reason?

FG Well, he just didn't think it was his idea of the way we should advertise.

HD It made it sound too profligate, as though you were suggesting too much money be spent...

FG No, I don't think that had anything to do with it. He didn't think it was in very good taste...

HD You didn't have a campaign for Men's Diamond Jewelry?

FG Well, yes, we did a lot of rather fancy advertising about gentlemen...about good taste and accomplishment.

HD Did you also do trade ads?

FG Oh, sure.

HD I meant to say, though, did you do them, or did they divide it up and have somebody...?

FG Yes, well; those things on the wall...those all offer trade ads.

HD Who are they? You know, I'm looking on your wall at one 1952, 1957, 1958...Associated Business Publications Awards of Merit, and all to diamonds and N W Ayer, and I didn't notice those when I came in. Those are very impressive.

FG Well, there really are a lot more. I've got a medal, now the real thing.

HD Well, yes, this certificate...and that's the medal. At a later point when Ken Slifer was here, he was your boss on that thing for a while too, wasn't he? You know, he mentions in his interview...he gives a little different version of...essentially that you did it at night, but he had kind of forgotten it all, but I'm wondering why he even got into this, because at that point he was not Copy Chief, was he?

FG Oh, I think he was Copy Chief. Slifer became the Copy Chief when Cecil went upstairs. Well, it was kind of funny. Cecil came to Slifer one day and said he didn't think "A "Diamond Is Forever" was correct English. I didn't know exactly what to say to him. I said, as far as I'm concerned the word "is" means it

exists...it's a synonym for exists.

HD George would have been embarrassed to have that pointed out to him 10 years later.

FG Well, I guess so, but I don't know...I don't know why he thought it was...

HD Personally I was very fond of George Cecil. You remember I worked for Harry Batten for a year or so when Dick Powell left...and in effect I was reporting to Cecil, who sat right outside Harry's door at that time. And all the stories about his crotchetyness and old-fashioned attitudes may be true, but I was very, very...

FG Oh, he was a lovely man. And he often would invite me...I was saying this...one time I sent out a memo to the whole department trying to get a name for a telecard. Eventually named the card "Tom Sawyer," but anyway Cecil wrote a memo to Ken Slifer, who was head of the department at that time and said, "Look, this is the best piece of writing I've seen in a long time."

HD Really?

FG And he would do that with everyone.

HD Yes, I know.

FG ...and send it around.

HD I know...he did that to me once or twice, too.

FG One of the greatest stories I remember about George Cecil was that he was going to the Copy Department one day, you know we had those walls that only went up so high.

HD Yes.

FG And somebody was talking on the telephone in a very loud voice--a woman, I think, and he said to somebody, "What on earth is she doing?" And the reply was, "She's talking to New York." And Mr. Cecil said, "Why doesn't she use the telephone?"

HD That's very funny. Was Ayer Public Relations involved then as they are now? That went back a long ways, did it?

FG I think so. Probably from the very beginning.

HD From the beginning. Was there something then called the "Diamond Information Center"?

FG Well, I think so. I don't remember.

HD Who do you remember being involved with in that PR stuff?

FG Dorothy Digman.

HD Yes, she was called "The Diamond Lady" to the trade.

FG Well, I knew Dorothy before I came here. I guess she'd already come to New York to work on the public relations end...before I came to Ayer.

HD Don Thompson had something to do with it.

FG Yes, I remember him very well. I liked him very much. I noticed some other woman who went around and gave lectures. I can't remember her name.

HD I only knew Dorothy.

HD I remember she used to wear a hat in the office, which interested me.

FG She's a French Canadian.

FG Well...a few ads a year...

HD And Darrow was the Art Director for many years?

FG Well, almost all the time. I think Leo Leoni might have been on.

HD Leo Leoni?

HD You know, so many people are scared to give any credit, and I thought it was kind of interesting that Coiner, because of his interest in the fine arts, gave so much credit to Gerry Lauck.

FG I think Lauck deserves it.

HD Did Batten ever have a part of this, or not?

FG Batten, no. He wasn't really active in the business. The one thing he was interested in was Sealtest, and he used to service that himself. Over in New York with ads and handwriting in his pocket, and stuff like that. But I don't think that...very little...and I'm sure he did much more so when he was a famous young man...

HD You know, by the time I came in '58 he was really, you know, so far in the background of the advertising that we considered, I think, Shelly as the advertising person, but there was never any question about who was the boss, was there? You know, it was Batten's...everything was just...

FG Well, he was the money man, you know...

HD And the front man, and a citizen of Philadelphia? He ran the house. I know that, because I worked for him, you know, in that public relations job for a while.

FG Well, I don't know too much about how much activity he took in terms of the agency...you know, the money standpoint.

HD So, how long were you there? When did you retire, Frances?

FG Well, in 1970. I was there 27 years.

HD From '43 to '70. That's a long run. Just while we're at it, what else do you remember about the fine arts period and Mr. Lauck? Didn't he work in consultation...cooperation with Charlie Coiner?

FG Oh, yes.

HD I believe they were good friends. You know. I just wondered.

FG The best thing that ever happened to Charlie Coiner, because he had the chance of sampling the fine arts world.

HD And later, of course, the Container Corporation kept it up. Did you do brochures and collateral material...did you? I didn't know whether they had a special group of people doing that or whether...

FG Well, sometimes...

HD ...the impression that you were the only person that wrote anything there.

FG Well, I was on De Beers...nobody else had it. But some of the stuff...there are some wonderful booklet ideas that were put out by the Public Relations Department. One of the things...about my career is that I never...by the time television came along it was almost too late for me, because I was essentially a print writer, and I can't remember...I can't claim any at all of that TV stuff.

HD You've got to remember that a small percentage of the business was in television until...we were the last agency of the big ones to get 50% of our business in broadcast. You've got to remember that Mr. Batten pulled the entire Broadcast Department back to Philadelphia in 1958. I wonder if it should have been going the other way instead of...but Batten just loved Philadelphia so much.

FG They were always trying to prove...Philadelphia was closer to New York...clients in New York agencies were. And that was very difficult sometimes. We worked on Lever Bros. for a while.

HD What was the product?

FG Cert...but anyway, I would have to go up to New York in the morning and present advertising and listen to the product man, come back home again, home at midnight, and be back in New York the next morning for coffee to prove that Philadelphia was closer to New York than the people in New York were.

HD Yes, yes. I know, Batten had a big thing about this. Of course, they should have had a place for you to stay overnight to do it instead of having to...

FG Well, they didn't. Of course, it was up to the...I blame this more on the servicemen than on company policy, because they were so eager to prove...

HD ...that there was no disadvantage in being in Philadelphia. Of course, that was the...

FG It was a disadvantage for people like me who had to do it.

HD You know, we've concentrated so much on De Beers. Tell me about some of the other accounts you worked on.

FG I was trying to remember some of the things that I worked on at the same time as I worked on diamonds...Supplee, the milk account, Yardley, Sargent's Dog Medicine, Telechron Clocks, Hills Bros. Coffee...but it was really...and then one time I worked on Goodyear, where I was writing retail aids for tires, and so I did...a constant and amazing variety of things that I did at the same time.

HD Frances, did you work on the telephone?

FG Only occasionally. There was a headline for an ad...on the Princess Phone...It's little, it's lovely, it lights.

HD I remember that very well.

FG And I wrote that as a headline.

HD "It's little, it's lovely, it lights." That's a nice headline. I remember that ad.

FG ...a kind of a slogan for it.

HD Let's get back to Ayer. It was not just the biggest agency in Philadelphia, but it was the only national one. How did you feel about...did you feel you were working in the best place at that point, or...

FG Oh yes. I don't think I have the kind of personality it takes...I mean I wanted to have one job and grow in it...

HD Not moving around all the time...

FG ...every six months, or whatever they do in New York. I know they do. They pay you a helluva lot of money, and then you have to figure out they're paying you \$50,000...back in those days \$50,000 was an awful lot of money. But you could get that for six months, maybe...

HD Sure, and be out on your neck. Right, right. Most Ayer people in those days never talked about what they made.

FG ...Ayer is a wonderful place to learn the advertising business, provided your parents can afford to send you.

HD Harry Batten was an interesting guy in the sense that he was certainly a self-made-man and hadn't gone to school very long, but he liked Ivy League types, with a strong tendency toward Yale.

FG There are some clients like that, too.

HD He was a very practical man. The funny thing is that Margaret Rogers tells an interesting thing because, you know, Lou Hagopian only knew Batten in his really most declining years, you know, and I mean things were not doing very well, so I think that Lou is rather critical of the memory of Batten. Margaret Rogers one time said to me "Howard, the funny thing is that, if Lou knew the first Batten that she knew in the early 40's..." "If he knew that Batten, he'd find out that he's very much like him." I told that to Lou one time.

FG They celebrated the 25th anniversary in South Africa. Warner Shelly and Gerry Lauck went to South Africa, and they both came back all smiles that they'd been wined and dined, and had each been given a gold watch in honor of the anniversary. Gerry came into my office and showed me the gold watch, and I said "Where's my gold watch?" Well, his mouth flew open, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Nobody had thought of me, so...I've often thought since...where's my gold watch, or better still, my diamond watch?

HD That's a good question, of course. And why not diamonds? What's the story about somebody, was it Mr. Shelly who was, during the war, almost shot down, or shot at, or something? Do you know anything about that?

FG No, I don't. Oh, I have a cute story about going down to some Army place...the headquarters...

HD The Pentagon?

FG No, no. North Carolina, I think. Anyway, while it had nothing in particular to do with me, but the woman who was the head of the...not the Advertising Manager, but the woman who was actually in the Army...and they had an ad that they were going over, and somebody suggested that they put a line above it, or put something with it. So she turned to me and said, "What do you think?" and I said, "Well, it all depends on how pristine you wish to keep the signature." She drew back and said, "What do you mean?" And so I told her what it meant, and she said "Oh, I thought you were using some sort of advertising lingo."

HD Oh. She never heard the word.

FG Well, she had heard the word, but she thought, you know, all these crazy things that we say sometimes...advertising lingo...and she thought that's what I was using.

HD Frances, thank you very much.