

# NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

JAMYE FLOWERS COPLIN  
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT  
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WRIGHT: Today is November 12th, 2008. This interview with Jamye Flowers Coplin is being conducted for the Johnson Space Center Oral History Project in Houston, Texas. The interviewer is Rebecca Wright, assisted by Sandra Johnson and Jennifer Ross-Nazzal. Thanks so much for coming in today to visit with us for this project. We'd like for you to start by telling us how you first became interested in working for NASA.

COPLIN: I was a senior in high school, and my sister was working at NASA at the time. She had told me that NASA was hiring, and that she thought it would be a good opportunity for me if I wanted to apply. So I applied in the spring of 1966 and was hired and started work in June 1966.

WRIGHT: What did you know about NASA at the time?

COPLIN: Very little, to be quite honest. I remember when the announcement was made in the early '60s that the Manned Spacecraft Center [MSC, now Johnson Space Center, JSC, Houston, Texas] was going to be built in the Clear Lake area. I was a teenager at the time and very naively thought that oh, they're going to launch from Clear Lake. It wasn't until two or three years later that I finally realized that the Mission Control support area would be in Houston, the launch was actually going to be from the Cape [Canaveral, Florida]. But I do remember thinking about that at the time. In March of 1965 the first Gemini flight, John [W.] Young and [Virgil I.]

Gus Grissom flew that one. They made the flight on my birthday, the 23rd of March. So I always remembered that mission. With my sister having worked there, I did have a keen interest in it.

WRIGHT: Were you from this area originally?

COPLIN: Yes. I was born in Texas City, [Texas] spent most of my childhood in Dickinson, [Texas] graduated from Dickinson High School. So I'm a Gulf Coast girl.

WRIGHT: So you got to watch the whole impact of how NASA changed the area, didn't you?

COPLIN: The whole impact, yes. But I was little; six or seven years old. I remember my family going over to Clear Lake. We'd go there and swim on the weekend. It was pastures on both sides of the street. I do remember the [James M.] West Mansion [large home on Clear Lake built by James M. West in 1929/1930]. Sitting there all by itself, as a child I was just blown away by it. But it was rural. Farming country. It wasn't too many years later that it was a city.

WRIGHT: Well, tell us about your first job and the duties and how you became part of the astronaut office.

COPLIN: My sister was working at NASA, and in the spring of 1966 she married another NASA employee, Tom [Thomas G.] Mancuso. My sister is Dianna [M. Flowers Mancuso]. [Tom] was working in procurement when I went out to NASA and interviewed for a position. They called

and offered me a position. There were, I think, several openings at the time. One of them was in procurement office, and the other one was in the astronaut office. My new brother-in-law worked in procurement, and I thought, "Oh, okay, it may not be too good of an idea for me to go in and work in the same area that he's working." So I by default picked the astronaut office. At that time I really wasn't completely aware that the astronauts' home base was in Houston. They always had been associated with the Cape so much and Florida. I really wasn't aware that the astronaut office was *the* astronaut office. I thought maybe it was some type of support unit.

WRIGHT: Quite a surprise on your point to find out that.

COPLIN: Oh, it was quite a surprise.

WRIGHT: You had a few, and then you had many, right? A number of astronauts came in right after you got there.

COPLIN: Exactly. When I started, it was the first week in June [1966]. I had not interviewed in the astronaut office. I was interviewed at personnel out at Ellington [Air Force Base, Houston, Texas]. Personnel was still out at Ellington at the time. I remember going out there and processing and fingerprinting in one of the old barracks buildings out there. So I didn't have an interview in the astronaut office. My first day after processing, reporting to the astronaut office was to Sarah [W.] Lopez. She was the admin [administration] person. I remember she was a wonderful lady. She took me down the hall and introduced me to John [J.] Peterson. Mr. Peterson was the chief of staff. I know he had an admin title. I don't remember exactly what it

was. But he was in the front office, and his secretary was Maxine Henderson. Sarah introduced me to him, Maxine and Gay [R.] Alford, and then took me in and introduced me to Alan [B.] Shepard, [Jr.]. That was the first time I realized exactly where I was, when I went in the office and was introduced to [Shepard]. I still remember my knees shaking, and it was quite a surprise. Quite a surprise.

WRIGHT: Can you share with us what it was like as you went through the years? I know we're jumping up a little bit, but since you mentioned Alan Shepard, what it was like having him as an overall boss of that office?

COPLIN: I just adored the man. He has a reputation and had one back then for his cool looks and steely-eyes—he could shut you down in a minute just by a look. But he ran a tight ship. Most of the guys at the time—and I think they will all freely admit it—were a little bit afraid of the man. But he had a very casual elegance about him and a presence. He promoted that. He worked at keeping himself just slightly away from the group. He wanted everyone in the office to know that he was in charge. He was friendly and would stop and visit in the office with you, but there was no mistaking that he ran the boat.

WRIGHT: Tell us about your working group and the people that you met that were there. For instance, were there other young women that had come to work there as secretaries as well?

COPLIN: The same week that I started, Lynn [M.] Cross started in the astronaut office also, [and was assigned to the Appearance Section]. I was hired as a stenographer, for the steno pool,

which ended up being two [of us]. Georgie Heupers, and when I arrived there were two of us. Our immediate supervisor was Sarah Lopez, and we were the floaters. We [took dictation and also] backed up the flight secretaries. They had just hired Charlotte [A.] Maltese, now Ober, to be the secretary to the new 19, the "Original 19" [Astronaut Group 5] as they called themselves. That was the group that had been named in April [1966]. They had [also] just started arriving in the office when I came. I always considered myself to be part of that group, because we all arrived at the same time. Shortly after I arrived we were moving upstairs, because getting those 19 we practically doubled the astronaut corps. I think we had around 49 or 50 at the time. We had taken over the third floor in Building 4, and I remember the first few days and weeks were spent mainly packing and getting the offices ready for the move.

The [flight] secretaries were secretary stenographers. If they were busy and the guys needed someone for dictation, then [Georgie and I] were called. We backed up the secretaries if they were out on leave or vacation or at lunchtime or [when they were on a temporary duty at the Cape]. We were all down the hall [from each other], so we [could easily] back up the secretaries. That was what our position was. When they brought the 19 in, they had grouped them all in offices wherever they could. When we moved upstairs, they completely reorganized everything. Charlotte was no longer secretary to that 19 group. They integrated the 19 in with all the other astronauts.

That move, everyone in the astronaut group [was reassigned] alphabetically [into five flights]. Each secretary had eight to ten astronauts. When we moved upstairs, Flight A secretary was Toni [Antoinette J.] Zahn, and the chief of Flight A was [M.] Scott Carpenter. Flight B secretary was Charlene Stroman, and the chief of Flight B at that time was [L.] Gordon Cooper, [Jr.]. Flight C chief was Gus Grissom. That position was vacant when we moved upstairs. They

needed another secretary, and that was the flight that they chose to have the vacancy. Charlotte Maltese was the secretary to Flight D. Jim [James A.] McDivitt I think at the time was chief of that flight. The last flight, Flight E, was Penny [Mavis E.] Study secretary and Wally [Walter M.] Schirra, [Jr.], the chief of that flight.

Now when we moved upstairs, it was going to be several weeks [before the Flight C secretarial position was announced]. They put me in [that position] temporarily, which was a big surprise, and a big adjustment, because I really had not become familiar enough with the office. For a few days it was stressful being put in that position, but it ended up being great, because I got to know Gus Grissom, and would not have [otherwise] had the opportunity to work [directly] with some of the guys [in Flight C]. Martha [L.] Caballero was eventually hired into that position, and I went back to the steno pool. I did not have enough time in grade nor the experience to qualify for it. So that was the reason I got sent packing again.

But for the most part the secretaries, each backed one [other flight]—Flight A and Flight B backed each other. Flight C backed Admiral Shepard and his office. Flight D and Flight E backed each other. I stayed in the steno pool and floated doing that type of work for several months. Then it was Admiral Shepard—how it was originally set up was that Gay Alford, his secretary, all the mail would come from the mailroom, and that was another section we had upstairs. We had the mailroom that handled all of the requests for the astronauts and for photographs, letters, and they also sorted all the mail, technical and personal, that came in.

The technical mail went to Gay Alford, and Gay was the one that actually distributed the mail. But when we brought the new 19 in, that became a huge job, and Gay just couldn't handle it. So Admiral Shepard, if I remember correctly it was Admiral Shepard, decided to create a position that would handle all of the [technical] correspondence and mail that came into the

office. I was put in that position, which was also another neat opportunity for me, because about once a week I would get to go in and sit down with Admiral Shepard and he would tell me what the changes in the assignments were and who was supposed to be getting what particular pieces of mail program-wise, hardware. [At the time it was] probably [only] Al Shepard, Gay Alford, and I that knew which guys were getting which assignments.

WRIGHT: That's pretty interesting at that point in your life to already be in the know in that circle.

COPLIN: It was. We generated of course a tremendous amount of correspondence [within] the office. The individual secretaries kept their files, but it [was] also required that there be CB—that was our [mail] code—master files kept also. I was in an office by myself to begin with, and it was lined with cabinets to maintain [the CB files and also the incoming] mail distribution. I continued to fill in for the secretaries when they were out. I think it was a few months into that assignment that Goldie [B. Newell] in Deke [Donald K.] Slayton's office in Building 2—now Building 1—she was Don [Donald T.] Gregory's and Tom [Thomas U.] McElmurry's secretary. She was going to be out for about six weeks because of surgery she was having. I was sent over to Mr. Slayton's office for six weeks to work with Mr. Slayton and Sue [M.] Symms, Mr. Slayton's secretary, which was also another fortunate break for me early on, because I got to know Mr. Slayton very well, and he got to know me.

It was a lucky [assignment] timewise, [as I] got to know a lot of people, and a lot of people in Building 2, that I would not have had that opportunity to have that close of a working relationship with [otherwise]. So by the time I got back over to the astronaut office again, I had

been around the block a few times. But it served me well. I was grateful for the opportunity. Having been a floater, I did have the opportunity to work with all of the guys instead of just being assigned right off the bat to a particular flight. I remember the first one I ever took dictation from was Ed [Edward H.] White [II]. I remember being so nervous and so scared. He was just the most delightful [person]. I was 18 years old. I think they were all afraid that they were going to scare me, which worked in my favor also, because they were very sweet and very protective. So I really did appreciate that.

WRIGHT: Was this your very first job or had you worked before?

COPLIN: My very first job. I graduated from high school one week, and I was standing in Alan Shepard's office about seven days later.

WRIGHT: That's amazing.

COPLIN: It is.

WRIGHT: It really is.

COPLIN: It really is, and I was the baby of the office. I was the young one. But they gave me just wonderful opportunities. For it to be the first job, it was a learning experience, but it served me well throughout my career, because of the team effort and the quality of work and the quality of people that I was exposed to and working with. I was very, very lucky.



WRIGHT: Well, so much was going on during those years. The flights were very quick one right after another.

COPLIN: Very quick.

WRIGHT: You've already mentioned your duties changed so often. One of the things that you mentioned that you had done along the line was to maintain checklists and flight plans. What did all that entail as you got into more of your job?

COPLIN: I [haven't had access to] any of my files [before this interview], so I couldn't go back and actually get the dates. But sometime I believe in '68—I had been there less than two years, probably a year and a half. Charlene Stroman, the secretary to Flight B and Gordon Cooper, left and took a position with the State Department in Washington, DC, and that position became available. I at that time then had my year in grade and was eligible for a flight secretary position. I applied for it and did get it. So my first secretarial position of my very own was secretary of Flight B with Gordon Cooper. We had the responsibility for of course the telephones, answering the telephones, and technical and personal correspondence, and the travel.

Oh, my gosh, the travel. Working with ten astronauts [who] traveled at least one trip a week, it's hundreds of trips a year, and we had to do the orders, [including] overseas, especially after the flights. They would do the round the world trips, and it was State Department, and everyone was involved in those [trips]. The travel vouchers and travel took up a lot of our time.

[We were also responsible for maintaining the astronaut's manuals and checklists,] especially [for the crew assigned astronauts. As their missions neared, the changes came and were updates] to the actual checklists that they used for flight. [Updates] would come in the office in the mail, and the names were written on them, who would get them. We would go get their checklists and pull the old sheets out and put the new sheets in [or make handwritten changes]. They were little binders, [and] didn't have covers on them, but they had the single rings. We had to do those for each one of the guys. I remember it was time-consuming, because you had to be very careful to make sure you pulled the right pages. I remember on a lot of occasions stacking that stuff and taking it home with me. I just didn't have time to do it during the day. That was something that I could do at night while I was sitting home watching television, was [updating] checklists [and manuals]. The current crew [was] the priority on updating the checklists. It was strictly technical, [and] most of the time it was this switch was going to get flipped instead of the other one.

WRIGHT: They needed to know.

COPLIN: They needed to know.

WRIGHT: One thing too that we all have to think about is the technology was so different then.

COPLIN: Oh, yes.

WRIGHT: Or maybe we should say it was more archaic than what we're doing now.

COPLIN: It was. We typed on IBM Select typewriters and had to type in at least—the least was triplicate, which meant erasing carbon copies when you had any type of error on them, [for] anything that went out of the office. They were fairly lenient with regard to using [Bic] Wite-Out [correction fluid] and that type of thing. Most people now don't even know what Wite-Out is. But if anything actually left the office, then we did it until it was perfect. Anything that went to Mr. Slayton's office—we used to laugh, because having been over there and worked with Sue Symms, she really did get a ruler out and measure the margins to make sure anything that was going to the director's office was exact, exact. So we called her the ruler lady. Sue was wonderful. We knew what was required, and we produced good documents.

WRIGHT: No option.

COPLIN: No option.

WRIGHT: You also had to work with the families.

COPLIN: Yes.

WRIGHT: So how were you able to do that?

COPLIN: We actually were a family within the astronaut office, and the guys traveled—I still call them “guys”—the astronauts traveled so much, and were out of town. When they were in town,

they were in [meetings and] the simulators for hours. We were the contacts the wives had as far as being able to get to their husbands. We developed very close relationships with the wives and the families, especially during launches. We babysat. I babysat for the [Stuart A.] Roosa family and for the [Ronald E.] Evans and for the [Joe H.] Engles and for Bill [William A.] Anders. There were about two or three of us in the office that would babysit, so we really did get to know the kids and the families. Of course the astronauts' sisters and brothers and mothers and dads would call the office, and we all knew them very well too.

WRIGHT: Was part of your job somewhat protecting them from the public?

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COPLIN: You bet, yes, yes. We were a bunch of mother hens in that regard. We did. We screened calls. But we didn't screen calls to the extent that the guys didn't get messages. We [never] said, "Okay, throw this one away." They always got the messages, [and] we took very detailed information with regard to who it was that was calling. We did protect them from the public, but back then Building 4 and the astronaut office was an "open" area. There were no security guards. You came in the gate with a sticker on your car. That's how you were waved in. The guys were forever getting rid of their cars and not pulling those stickers off. I remember I threatened them with bodily harm on more than one occasion, because security would get—"Okay, this is the fifth time we've issued a decal for someone." So anyone could walk up to the third floor and walk down the halls.

[The five flights occupied] the outside offices. Two astronauts per office, except for the chief of the flights. They had their own offices. Then the flight secretary generally sat outside of the chief's office, so you had to enter through the secretary's office to get into the chief's. But

otherwise you could walk up the stairs or come up the elevator and walk down the hall and go in and visit with any of them. Now you can't even get in the building without having a cipher code.

WRIGHT: What kind of hours did you have? You mentioned already about taking stuff home with you.

COPLIN: Terrible. For seven years, terrible hours, yes.

WRIGHT: Very full days.

COPLIN: Very very full days. You worked until you could get to a stopping point, then you went home. But I think my hours were supposed to be 7:30 [a.m.] to 4:00 [p.m.], and I rarely got out of there before 5:30 or 6:00 [p.m.]. We put in a lot of hours, worked a lot of weekends. The only time I ever remember getting paid overtime was when we were involved in an accident board. Then they would ask the secretaries to volunteer to come in on the weekends in support of typing up the accident reports and assisting with that. Money was always allocated for that. But otherwise it was part of the team effort. Everyone worked those hours. We weren't the only ones. Everyone did. When the astronauts would be in the simulator from 8:00 in the morning till 5:00 in the afternoon, the time that they could get their work done as far as what they needed to do at their desk, was after that. We all wanted to be available.

WRIGHT: The work schedule that you had, and that whole team spirit, of course, brought you all as you mentioned so close together as a family. I know there were so many good times, but there

was also a few times that weren't so good. You lost a few of your family members while you were there in the seven years. Can you share with us what that was like in trying to keep working and knowing that some folks weren't coming back to their desk?

COPLIN: When we lost Grissom, White, and [Roger B.] Chaffee, that was extremely difficult for everyone in the office. Since I had been put in the position of working for Colonel Grissom when we all moved upstairs—and that was actually the first secretarial position I had, even though it was temporary—and I had very very strong feelings for Colonel Grissom. When we lost that crew, that was extremely difficult. That was in January of 1967, so I had only been in the astronaut office about six months. I heard it on the radio in the car, that the crew had been lost.

So by the time everybody got to the office, it was an extremely difficult time. But [it was] another [early] lesson learned [for me] from the astronauts, the support, [and] the secretaries. The main [focus] was to find out the cause and to correct it. Once the funerals were over, everybody was at work. Apollo 7, the spacecraft was completely redesigned. Schirra, [Donn F.] Eisele, and [Walter] Cunningham did a tremendous job. Everyone in the office did. It was difficult time.

WRIGHT: Must have been a great feeling to share with everybody when Apollo 7 was able to launch and had such a fantastic mission and came back ready to go.

COPLIN: Yes. Oh, exactly. Because had that spacecraft had problems [on Apollo 7], we would not have met President [John F.] Kennedy's [goal]—we wouldn't have done it. Because the

spacecraft and the crew and the mission was such a success, that was the step we needed to get going.

WRIGHT: Then of course Apollo 8 followed.

COPLIN: To the Moon, around the Moon on Christmas Eve, yes.

WRIGHT: For a while it was a secret that they were going to take that trip. Were you in the know before that happened as well?

COPLIN: Yes, yes, we were. But that really was quite a surprise for everyone. The decision was made quite quickly. Someone had the brilliant idea, "Okay, this all worked so well on Apollo 7, let's do the swing around." [James A.] Lovell [Jr.] said, [Frank] Borman, Anders, they all said, "Sure, let's give it a go." So away we went. It was quite something. Then [Apollo] 9 tested the Lunar Module [LM]. That was the first test of the Lunar Module. That was done in Earth orbit. Everything was just going perfectly. Everything was going perfectly with those missions. It was exciting, it really was.

WRIGHT: When you mentioned earlier about working in the correspondence issue of it, and all the manuals and of course doing the checklists and things, did you find yourself picking up more and more of the technical information and learning more and more about how everything worked?

COPLIN: Oh, yes, oh, yes, I really did, and I got to [the point that] I didn't need to check with Admiral Shepard—Captain Shepard at the time, Admiral Shepard later—with regard to who needed to get a particular document. It didn't take me long to pick up on the jargon, on the acronyms, and that was a big adjustment. Oh, my gosh, learning all those acronyms, and going through the mail. Because a lot of times, especially before the [official] announcements were made, [as to] which astronauts were officially [assigned to specific] programs or missions, we would get CCed [carbon copied] on everything, and it would just be sent to the astronaut office. So a large part of my job at that time would be to read these and figure out what it was about and who was working on it. At first I spent quite a bit of time in those weekly meetings with Shepard, and he was extremely gracious and would explain to me [a] particular [subject]—I learned a lot. It wasn't too long before I got to where I could read [technical memos] and knew who they went to.

WRIGHT: You were the keeper of the knowledge, and I bet people started coming to you asking you.

COPLIN: They did.

WRIGHT: I was thinking as you got involved more with the missions and actually working, the same type of things would come across your desk, and you were able to filter that information out.



COPLIN: Correct, right, right. Any of the accident reports. We had secret clearances. I remember specifically those things I had to hand-carry to the astronauts. They had to read them and then return them directly to me. We had to sign back and forth, back and forth. The other secretaries did not [officially] get to see those [reports]. I was the only admin person besides Gay Alford that saw the accident reports.

WRIGHT: So you had a secret clearance. That's very interesting, because someone so young—maybe it was easier to clear you that way. You didn't have a whole lot of experience to go through.

COPLIN: That probably is true. But they did, they actually did knock on the doors of the neighbors. I know that for a fact. They tell you they will do that. Well, they do.

WRIGHT: They do?

COPLIN: They do.

WRIGHT: Did you also work with the contractors? We know that the astronauts would go to the different facilities.

COPLIN: We did.

WRIGHT: Did you have to correspond with those offices as well?

COPLIN: Yes, and mainly telephone. We did teletype back then [also]. But most of it was telephone. Especially with North American Rockwell [Corporation] and Grumman [Aerospace Corporation] that was building the LM, and North American Rockwell that was building the Command Module. So we had people out there that we interfaced with all of the time. At the Cape and in Houston the simulators, part of the simulator staff were [Philco] Ford [Corporation] and Singer-Link. We had quite a bit of interface with those contractors.

WRIGHT: That's interesting. Again all the new technology coming on and you learning more and more about what they all do. I was thinking what we might do is stop for a second, because we're actually leading up more close into working with Apollo 10. We'll just stop for a second and let you get a drink of water.

[pause]

I know that one of the special parts of your time working at the Manned Spacecraft Center was that you were very involved in the Apollo 10 mission. Tell us how you were able to be a part of that special time.

COPLIN: The flight secretaries took turns accompanying the crews to the Cape. It was generally the secretary to the commander that went. But we rotated, and I had been assigned to secretary to Flight B and Gordon Cooper. Gordon Cooper was the backup commander of Apollo 10. The backup crew was Donn Eisele and Ed [Edgar D.] Mitchell. I also worked for two of the support crew. Penny Study was secretary to Tom [Thomas P.] Stafford at the time. She was unable to go to the Cape, and I had been asking Shepard if I could go. He kept kidding me saying, "Not

until you're 21, not until you're 21." I turned 21 in March of 1969, and when the opportunity came for a secretary to go to the Cape with Apollo 10, Shepard let me go, [and] so that was my first time to accompany a crew to the Cape. It was not the first time I'd seen a launch, but it was the first time I got to go [and work as crew secretary].

The secretaries generally went down about six weeks in advance of the launch. We had a pretty good TDY [temporary duty] on that. When we went with the crews, we worked in the offices that were right outside the crew quarters where the guys lived when they were at the Cape. At that time Hal [Harold G.] Collins was the gentleman that was in charge of those offices, and Lola [H.] Morrow was still down there on Apollo 10. She actually worked for Hal Collins, and Lola had been around since I think Mercury days. My first trip to the Cape, was on Apollo 10, working with Tom Stafford and Gene [Eugene A.] Cernan and John Young, [who] was in Flight E also.

But it was different than working in Houston in that everything was mission-oriented. In Houston you might have three guys out of your ten that were on the current mission, on current crew, and the rest of them were on one coming up. But when you went to the Cape with the crew, you were solely working with that group, that crew for that mission [and other astronauts at the Cape training for upcoming missions]. It was very, very focused.

A large part of our assignment down there was the guest list and working with the astronauts [supporting] their personal [matters which] needed to be handled right at the last before the missions. They [each] had their own family guest lists, their official guest lists, [and] their personal guest lists. We had NASA Headquarters guest lists and politicians and celebrities. We had to find them rooms, cars, and transportation, and that was a large part of what we did while we were down there, was really supporting their personal efforts.

WRIGHT: It had to be a challenge, because when you go now to that part of the country, there's many hotels and many attractions.

COPLIN: Not back then.

WRIGHT: I can't even imagine where you put these people.

COPLIN: Not back then. Yes, we were renting apartments, blocking [rooms]—this all would start months in advance of when we had to get these things set up. By the time we went to the Cape, we had the major portion of it done. It was just all the changes that would take place, all the changes that would come up.

The guys [flew T-38s and helicopters, which] was [an opportunity] to get away from [the office]. For the most part, they just spent hours in the simulators [while] down [at the Cape]. It was really crunch time, those last six weeks. But the good thing about that crew was there was a little bit of levity to it.

At the time, in the late '60s, there was a lot of [unrest] in the country, [and] at the time I felt like I was very insulated and was not really a part of all that. It was going on and I was aware of it, but we were so focused on NASA's mission, and I was so involved that quite honestly, I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to things that were going on in other parts of the country.

But one thing that we all had enjoyed was Charles [M.] Schulz and Peanuts [cartoon], because Snoopy had climbed atop his wonderful little doghouse and had become the astronaut

going to the Moon. At the time I was [already] cutting out the [Peanuts comic strip] and saving them. It was absolutely a delight for me, and I think for the country, when the call signs for Apollo 10, the crew selected Charlie Brown and Snoopy. Charlie Brown was to be the Command Module and Snoopy was the Lunar Module that was going to fly just right close to the surface of the Moon.

When I had asked Gene Cernan about it recently—because I told him, I said, "I remember at the time, but I don't remember why." We were all fans of the comic strip. We talked about it. Charles Schulz was a presence. We had the [Silver] Snoopy Manned Flight Awareness Awards. He said that because of the popularity of the comic strip he always thought John Young was Charlie Brown, and so that's what planted the seed to see if they could get approval to use Charlie Brown and Snoopy as the call letters. I think that captured a lot of attention within the country.

Apollo 9 was the first that had [call signs,] Gumdrop and Spider, because the Command Module looked like a gumdrop and the Lunar Module looked like a spider. [Apollo] 8 did not because they did not carry a LM. So Charlie Brown and Snoopy, it was a "sign" of the times, it was levity when a lot of things were going on in the country. I think it drew a lot of positive attention to NASA and the space program and the mission itself, because it captured the public's attention.

WRIGHT: Well, looking back on Apollo 10, we know that they did some preparations for the mission. For instance, we know that they took the small portable tape recorder with music. They also had the capability of doing color television broadcasts. Did your duties help in any way in just for instance those two things? Did you know or did you have to help them get things

together for those? For instance, the music? Did you have any suggestions of what you thought they should be playing up in space?

COPLIN: No. That was actually personal selections and personal preference. Those were handled by the same people that handled the personal preference kits [PPK]. Now, we typed the listing of what was going to be put in the PPK, but as far as making the decision we didn't participate in that, [and it] was handled by another group. But [the music] was [on] little eight-track tapes. One of the [storage] items was white beta cloth, [with] a Velcro closing, and you opened it up, and there were all these little slots, and that's where they kept their tapes. A lot of times they recorded their own [music] or had them [specially] recorded. Each [astronaut] had their [musical] preference. There were country music fans and classical.

WRIGHT: Well, the story goes that you had asked, or someone had told Gene Cernan that you had a special item that you wanted him to take in his PPK.

COPLIN: Yes.

WRIGHT: Tell us about how that whole story came about, and how you were involved in a prank that now has come to be a historic Snoopy moment.

COPLIN: I think it was [not until] the morning of launch. It was a day launch, and we had all gone out early. I think the guys had already left the crew quarters. We had said our goodbyes. They'd leave the quarters in their bathrobes and head down to the white room to suit up. I think

it was Dave McBride who was the team leader. Dave apparently had told Captain Cernan that I had something that I wanted him to take to the Moon for me. Apparently Captain Cernan had told Dave, "Sure, I'll be glad to, but at this point the only thing I can do is stick it into the pocket of my spacesuit. But get it down to me and I'll take it for her."

So that was going to be the gotcha on Gene Cernan, because Dave McBride had this very, very large wonderful stuffed Snoopy. The plan was for me to stand at the door of the crew quarters as the crew was coming by with this Snoopy, and the gotcha would be on Gene Cernan that he was going to have to get this very large Snoopy in this very small pocket on the side of his spacesuit. So we were up for it, and it was going to be a good, fun time. The crew were suited up and were coming back down the hallway [as] I was standing at the door of the crew quarters just inside with the Snoopy in my [arms]. Just right at the last minute Dave McBride gave me a push, and I ended up out in the hallway.

Stafford was right there, and he stopped briefly and patted Snoopy's nose. That was a picture that defined that mission. Ended up doing so. I think Captain Young patted him when he went by. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Captain Cernan heading in my direction, and he was a man on a mission at that point. So I knew that I was in trouble. But he came and instead of patting Snoopy on the nose, he turned the prank into a gotcha on me, because he grabbed me and Snoopy and tried to get us in the elevator. So it ended up being that he was going to take Snoopy and me to the Moon if he could. But the picture itself was just—when you see Apollo 10, that's the one everyone thinks about. Tom Stafford still says that that is one of his, if not his favorite photo.

WRIGHT: He still refers to you how?

COPLIN: The Snoopy girl. Almost 40 years later, and Tom still introduces me as the Snoopy girl.

WRIGHT: So he wasn't able to take your personal item with him, the Snoopy. Did he go to the launch too? Did you take Snoopy to go watch the launch?

COPLIN: No. Snoopy stayed in the crew quarters, was guarding the crew quarters on launch day. But we did go out and see the launch.

WRIGHT: Tell us what that was like, watching your guys go up for the mission.

COPLIN: It was exciting, it was exciting. Of course there was concern, but the success of the previous missions gave you confidence. The Saturn V had launched beautifully, flawlessly. The guys were excited. They were well trained. They were ready to go. There was a great deal of excitement, apprehension, yes, but excitement, very much so. Seeing a Saturn V launch was just—I can still hear it. You don't forget that sound.

WRIGHT: Did you feel it as well?

COPLIN: Oh, you bet, you bet. It came right across at you.

WRIGHT: What were your duties during the launch and while the mission was going on?



COPLIN: During the launch once the guys left the quarters, we left shortly thereafter, too, and went out to the private area where we could view the launch. So we, [the secretaries,] were spectators at launch time. As soon as the launch was over, we went back into the crew quarters, [and] at that point I think they considered the secretary's duty at the Cape complete. Once the crew was launched, we returned to Houston. Sometimes they gave us a day before we needed to be back. But we would return to Houston and work the mission from our office in Houston.

Most of the time we were like everyone else, [and] we watched [and followed the missions] as much as we could. But [during Apollo] 10 I [also] worked for Mike [Michael] Collins, and he was getting ready to fly [Apollo] 11, and I also worked for [Charles] Pete Conrad, [Jr.,] and he was commander on [Apollo] 12. So a lot was happening in the office as 10 was flying; 11 was getting ready to go, and 12 was short behind. We were turning around those missions pretty quickly. We were going from a May 18<sup>th</sup> launch for Apollo 10, shooting for a July 16<sup>th</sup> launch for Apollo 11. So it was quick.

WRIGHT: Were you down there also for 11? Tell us your involvement with 11.

COPLIN: I did. I returned [for] 11. It should have been Toni Zahn, because she was working for Flight A at the time. Neil [A.] Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were both in Flight A. I was working for Mike Collins at the time. But there was an issue with Colonel Borman who had taken over as the chief of the flight when Scott Carpenter left. There was something that he was assigned to do or needed to do that Toni had to support, and she was unable to go. The people at the Cape, it's my understanding, requested that I return to work that mission. So I was back in Houston only a

couple of weeks and then I turned around and went back to the Cape to work with the 11 crew for the Apollo 11 mission, which at the time I was thinking, "Oh, boy, here we go again." But it was also, "Oh, my gosh, was I lucky," to be there on that mission.

[Apollo] 10 was wonderful and had very special memories, because it was the first one I had gone down there to work. But from the historical standpoint to be involved in the Apollo 11 mission and go be the crew secretary was quite an opportunity.

WRIGHT: All these guests and dignitaries and people that you helped arrange to be there, did you have an opportunity to meet them?

COPLIN: Oh, yes. They would come into the quarters, and we would give them private tours of the crew quarters. So we had an opportunity to meet them. There were also private parties that were held the night before launches down there that became quite famous and popular. The invitations were coveted to get to those. The guys had some very popular friends that were well known. We always took very special and good care of them.

I remember on 11 one of the things though, that crew was so quiet compared to the 10 crew. Armstrong was very and still is very soft-spoken, very quiet man. Buzz was at the time. Mike Collins is just the sweetest man, he's just adorable. But a very quiet crew. They had a tremendous amount of responsibility. There was so much anticipation with them being potentially the "first." So the atmosphere was considerably different than it was on 10 down there. I remember that for days in advance—I don't know how many times the White House called. It seemed like every time we turned around the White House was calling to check the phone lines, because President [Richard M.] Nixon was going to call the guys, and we needed to

make sure that all the lines were [okay.] I think there were a million people out there on the causeway areas to view that launch.

One of the things we tried to do when we were down there was the night before the launch we would try to go, some of the people in the office, because they would have the Saturn V lit up at night. We would try to make a good luck trip to get as close to the pad as we could, and just sit there and soak it all in and say a few little prayers for good flights and everything. That became a ritual for us to do that. I remember being out there that night on 11. It was exciting.

WRIGHT: Were you back in Houston when they landed on the Moon?

COPLIN: No.

WRIGHT: You were still there?

COPLIN: I stayed in Florida. For one thing, I was very very tired. We worked very long long hours leading up to Apollo 11. I had my car down there, and I was going to have to drive it back to Houston. I didn't want to be on the road if something didn't go right. I wanted to make sure I was where I could get home quickly if I needed to. So I stayed in Florida and was in Florida when they actually landed and Neil took his first step. Then I returned home shortly, I think the day after that. I came on back.

WRIGHT: You had to get Apollo 12 ready.

COPLIN: I had to get Apollo 12 ready, yes, Apollo 12.

WRIGHT: Quite a difference between Armstrong and Conrad.

COPLIN: Oh, yes, oh, yes, yes, Pete was Pete, he was one of a kind, he was one of a kind. Delightful. They were all just wonderful. They were all overachievers. All had their own unique individual personalities. Most of them had just great senses of humor and appreciated that a good laugh and a lot of levity helped to ease the stress in the situation. So we did have a good time. We had some fun times.

WRIGHT: I guess it helps if you had a sense of humor so that you could laugh along with them.

COPLIN: You had to, because they would play jokes on us just for the sport of it. So you had to learn to give as good as you got.

WRIGHT: Other than Snoopy, did you have a chance to do any gotchas back to that crew or crews in general?

COPLIN: It was generally more in the office. I made the comment one time to one of the guys—I can't remember, but I think it was Ron Evans—that I was always looking for string. I never could find string. Well, about three days later I come into the office at 7:30 in the morning and I cannot get in the door of my office. It looked like a web in there. They had taken the string and

stretched it all over the office. They were always doing crazy things like that. Back then there was a brand called Hang Ten with these little “surfer” feet [for a logo]. [Gordon] Cooper had gotten to work with a stamp pad [in Charlene Stroman’s office] and put little feet running all over the walls so it looked like this little creature had been in there overnight. They were always doing crazy things like that. We generally couldn’t get back at them too much, but we did our share, we certainly did.

WRIGHT: It’s amazing how busy they were, they found time to do those types of things.

COPLIN: That was the way they let off a little bit of steam and got out from underneath a lot of the stress. They worked horrendous hours, absolutely horrendous hours. We were good, [easy] targets. So were the training guys and the team leaders, and they were always slipping things in their checklists that they would find when they were flipping through their checklists. They would find all these fun little things and different patches. I think it helped. I think it helped a lot.

WRIGHT: I guess you found some of those things too, when they would slip them in for the guys, you would find them first.

COPLIN: Oh, yes, oh, yes, yes.

WRIGHT: It must have given you some kind of entertainment, watching them find those things.

COPLIN: Oh, it was. They enjoyed it. The guys that thought up these things were always very proud of what they did. The astronauts had great appreciation for the creativity behind these gotchas and pranks.

WRIGHT: You were telling us during the break about Grissom and lunch with space food. Could you share with us the details about that?

COPLIN: I was working with Colonel Grissom in Flight C at the time. The guys were asked to test things. One of the things was the food. So Colonel Grissom had told me he was going to fix me lunch one day. That he did. It was the biggest mess I have ever seen. I don't [remember] what it was. He added too much water to it, whatever it was. So it was floating. He's behind his desk. I'm sitting in front of the desk. I think after squeezing the water out of about three spoonfuls, we both decided that I probably needed to go over to the cafeteria and pick up a couple of tuna sandwiches because he didn't mix it right. But he was a lot of fun.

WRIGHT: You didn't recommend him to be the chef, I take it.

COPLIN: No, no. But he learned. That was a learning experience for him. I think he probably even may have made some changes in what he was selecting as his food choices. Because they were given choices as far as what was going to be available for these flights, and that they could pick what they wanted for specific meals, and that's what would be packed.

WRIGHT: We've talked some about what you did in preparation for the missions. When they came back, did you work with them as far as their debriefs and suggestions that they would have for the next crew?

COPLIN: No. Because those were technical. The first debriefing they had was in the conference room in the astronaut office. They would give a pretty open and detailed briefing, and it was closed, it was the astronauts only. We may have gotten involved to the extent of typing up something for it. But as far as any preparation for it, we did not. But our main role post-mission was all the correspondence that was required in support of all the letters that were coming in, [and] all [their personal] thank-you letters. All of the Apollo crews made post-flight appearances, and most of them were world tours. So we were gearing up to get them ready to go. That meant all the visas and passports and working with the State Department to get all of that done. Then they would be gone for ten days, two weeks, sometimes longer than that on those post-flight tours.

WRIGHT: Didn't get to go on those.

COPLIN: No, we didn't. No, Headquarters always got to staff those. That wasn't totally fair. But we had another mission following. So it was nice to have them out of the office for a few days so we could get on with getting ready for Apollo 12.

WRIGHT: So you worked with 12 as well. Anything different on that one than you had done for the other two?

COPLIN: No, since we were lucky enough to do the landing on 11. I did not go to the Cape on 12, because I had just been twice. So I did not go with the crew on 12. I didn't return as a crew secretary until Apollo 16. I would have gone on 14, because I had every crew member on 14 except the one that counted, and that was Al Shepard. But I had the remainder of the prime crew and the backup crew and the support crew, all of them, and Gay, rightfully so, went to the Cape with the 14 crew. I went back to the Cape on 16 with John Young, Charlie [Charles M.] Duke, [Jr.,] and Ken [Thomas K.] Mattingly [II]. Cooper left after Apollo 10. He was backup commander on 10. He left after Apollo 10. That's when they did a little bit of another reorganization, and John Young ended up coming over to Flight B and became chief of Flight B. So I worked for John Young for quite some time.

When we originally moved upstairs, it was alphabetical. Then they got where they would change every once in a while and reorganize a bit to try to get the crews together. It didn't always work that way, but that's what they would try to do.

WRIGHT: What were your job duties during Apollo 13?

COPLIN: I was secretary for Flight B, and I'm trying to think. I may have been working for Fred [W.] Haise, [Jr.] at the time. He moved over into that flight eventually, over into Flight B. He had been in C. I did work for Ken Mattingly, and he was the one that was removed from the flight because of the exposure to German measles by Charlie Duke. That was another lesson as far as being able to see what is required and what is asked of you that you do. As an office and as a team and as an agency.



Apollo 13, anyone that was involved in it, it was quite something. I remember getting the call late at night that they had had the problem. I think for the first few hours, there were a lot of doubts that the crew was going to make it back. But they did, and that's one of NASA's best stories, Apollo 13.

WRIGHT: The missions that followed that had so much science. So again, you were faced with learning about the [Lunar] Rovers and the different things. You saw your astronauts learn all these new pieces of technology that were going with them.

COPLIN: Equipment, and a lot of the stuff that we were involved in as far as the correspondence and the memorandums had to do with their work on and training in the Rover and training with their experiments. I did have [a unique] opportunity one time. We had a rock [area], the "lunar surface," which was a little more than a rock pile. There was one at KSC [Kennedy Space Center, Florida] and at JSC, MSC back then. The guys were suited, and I went out [to the rock pile] with them [when] they were working on setting out experiments, and took notes on their comments as far as what it was that they thought needed to be changed or their comments that this cord was too long, or this was too short, or we weren't going to be able to attach what we needed to. That was interesting [and] a lot of fun, a lot of fun.

WRIGHT: Do you feel like you kind of got to go to the Moon there?

COPLIN: Yes, well, you really felt like you were part of it. More than just in the office.

WRIGHT: You got to see what you had been reading. That had to be neat. Hopefully it was cool for them.

COPLIN: Yes, they had their little portable air conditioners.

WRIGHT: Maybe you needed one.

COPLIN: I remember having heels on. I didn't know I was going until I got to the office that day. I remember having heels on being out there chunking around on rocks.

WRIGHT: That must have been difficult, but you did it. You mentioned you went to the Cape on Apollo 16. Then I know that you mentioned too that you worked up until 1973. So what was your last mission? Then did you help prepare things for the Skylab missions and that era?

COPLIN: [Apollo] 16 was the last one I went to the Cape. I was working for Gene Cernan at the time [Apollo] 17 flew. I did not go because I'd just been on 16. Wouldn't let me go back on 17. But after Apollo 12 flew, Pete Conrad decided that he was interested in flying Skylab, [and] he was named commander of the first Skylab crew, with Joe [Joseph P.] Kerwin, science pilot, and Paul [J.] Weitz, PJ. I quickly got into the Skylab mode also, which was really good for me, because I got to learn all about that program also.

When 17 finished up, the crew came back. Of course, before 17 ever flew we knew that the 18, 19, and 20 were not going to fly. So Skylab was going to be the follow-up program to Apollo. I worked for Conrad, Kerwin, and Weitz. So I got to go to the Cape with that crew.

One of the interesting things though, too, is after 13 and the exposure of measles and having to switch out Mattingly and [John L.] Swigert, [Jr.] they put the crews in not only quarantine afterward, but in quarantine before. So on 14, 15, and 16 when I was down there on 16, we had to stop before we'd come up. It was very limited access. You were on the personal contact list, you had to stop down in the lobby, get your temperature taken every morning before you were allowed to go up into the crew quarters. If there were any problems whatsoever, then you weren't allowed in direct contact with the crew.

Most of Skylab training was done in Houston, and they quarantined the Skylab crew in Houston. So for about a month before Skylab flew, and we all went to the Cape, we were quarantined over in Building 5 where the simulators were.

I got to go home at night, but it was very limited access [while] we were actually locked up in that building for about three weeks. Those guys were just crazy. They delighted in making sure that I brought them word from the outside world, because they couldn't get out and go anywhere. So that was a different aspect on Skylab, was that we were really quarantined tightly before we ever left to go to the Cape.

Another thing, too, when we were at the Cape it was brief. We went down just a few days before launch. We watched the launch of the Skylab itself [and] the crew was supposed to launch the next day. Then they had the problems with the damage during launch. But that was a unique launch, because we were standing on top of the O&C [Operations and Checkout] building on the roof with Conrad, Kerwin, and Weitz, the crew members, watching the Skylab launch. I had never [stood] with the crew watching something launch. So that was a unique experience.

That was a good crew. Conrad was Sky King. Paul Weitz, his responsibilities [included] the food, [and] that was a huge undertaking, because they were in space 30 days. The food for

Skylab, that was a big responsibility. Anyway, PJ was Sky Grits. Since Dr. Kerwin was the MD [medical doctor] on the mission, he was lovingly referred to as Sky Bones. I even have memos that were from Sky Bones to Sky King. Yes, we had a good time.

WRIGHT: When did you decide to leave?

COPLIN: I had been in grade for a number of years [and] I had gotten all my promotions on time, [but there was no potential for a higher in grade in the Astronaut Office unless Gay Alford left.]. I didn't think, short of hauling Gay Alford out by her heels, [that] as long as Alan Shepard was there, that was going to happen. I had looked at several other positions within NASA. Affirmative action was just starting [but] it just was not in full force. I had [applied for and been offered] several other positions [at JSC, but ultimately] I didn't feel I would be happy working at NASA in any other place besides the astronaut office. That may have not been right, but that's the way I felt [at the time]. I had an opportunity to work with M. David Lowe Personnel Services in Houston, [and] when Pete [Conrad] left, just months later, I went to Denver [Colorado] with him, when he joined American Television and Communications Corporation [ATC] there as a COO, chief operating officer, and spent a year and a half up there with him.

WRIGHT: Quite a move from Dickinson, Texas to Denver, Colorado.

COPLIN: It was terrible. It was terrible. For a Gulf Coast girl, yes, wearing a coat from September through June, and it snowed in June the first year I was there. Yes, I could have killed Pete for getting me into that.

WRIGHT: But it was a great opportunity to move up and get a different view.

COPLIN: Oh, it was. Again I was so lucky during that whole time, because being able to be with him, I had not had any exposure to private industry whatsoever. Pete and I worked very well together. I had worked for him for probably five years, and I could keep him in line pretty good. I of course knew Jane and the kids and the family, so that was good. My mother and dad were very comfortable with me leaving the area and the state. [Pete] gave me a lot of opportunity when we went up there. [ATC, a cable television company,] did not have personnel manuals and procedures, [and] Pete allowed me to do a lot of personnel work in addition to working for him. So it turned out to be a great opportunity.

WRIGHT: Did you stay connected and interested with NASA all the rest of the years?

COPLIN: Always, always, always have stayed closely connected with it. Drifted apart for a number of years, just like most of us did. Back in the late '90s I really got the bug to get back in touch with some people. A few people I had stayed in touch with a long time, all through that time, but in the late '90s had gotten the bug, [and] I started trying to locate all the old secretaries and admin people in the astronaut office in Houston and at the Cape and the quarters at the Cape [and] managed to round up quite a few of them. I did find Penny Study, Schirra's secretary. Schirra had gone to Denver when he left NASA, [and Penny Study had gone to Denver with him and] was my mother hen when I moved to Denver. I managed to track her down actually

through Wally Schirra at the time. She has since passed away, so I'm very glad that I made that effort.

For ten years now we have had our little group and we call ourselves the GALs, the Girls of Apollo Launches, [and] we have our little gatherings. We've met at the Cape and have things here in Houston, [and] we went to an event in Washington, DC. It's been nice to be back in touch with everyone.

WRIGHT: You mentioned that some materials that you had sent the Schulz museum, in fact you wrote, "In retrospect, if I could have picked any seven-year period to work at NASA and in the astronaut office, that would have been the exact seven years. The end of the Gemini Program through the first Skylab mission. How lucky can a girl right out of high school get?"

We look back at the late '60s. It was just beginning a time where women were starting to make the move to more careers. But it certainly wasn't something that was already out there for you. You were, as you mentioned, right out of high school and first job. Can you give us an idea what it was like to be part of this new movement? When you were 25, you left home to go to Denver. Just some of the thoughts that you might have been feeling about the whole world actually being at your doorstep, being ready to take on whatever you wanted to do?

COPLIN: Yes, and that seven years was, to date, NASA's greatest adventure. The end of Gemini, getting ready to do Apollo, the Apollo Program, [and] until we return to the Moon and go on to Mars, [Apollo is] going to be the crown jewel in NASA's history I think. It certainly is the one that captured the public at the time. It was a very, very positive thing for the country when there

was so much that was going on that was not positive. I think [the Apollo Program] helped the country as a whole.

As far as individually and feeling like being at the right place at the right time and how lucky I was to have the opportunities and the responsibilities that I had, I think everyone associated with NASA at the time felt the same way, that we were all very very lucky. As a young woman, I was extremely lucky [and] I did feel like it was a golden opportunity for me. It was probably years later that I fully recognized how lucky I had been, because it was [my] first job, I had nothing to compare it to. It was just at that time within NASA that women were given opportunities other than secretarial. I took summer classes, night school classes while I was working there. But the job became so demanding that it was just so difficult to do that part-time. But [it wasn't until after I left that] NASA really opened up and gave opportunities to women.

WRIGHT: You mentioned about going to the Cape, and you drove. Now it's nothing to think of a woman driving that length.

COPLIN: Oh, but back then, oh, yes. The guys got Jim Rathmann [Chevrolet dealership] in Melbourne [Florida]—he leased cars to the guys. Most of the guys would get [either] Corvettes [or Cadillacs]. The crews [of Apollo 12 and 15] had their Corvettes all painted alike. One of our little perks—jobs—we would switch the Corvettes out. One of the girls from the Cape would drive the new ones halfway, and from Houston [we would] drive the old ones, a year old, and spend the night and have a good time in Biloxi, Mississippi or Mobile, Alabama or somewhere, and switch cars. Then we'd drive the new 'vettes back [to Houston] and they'd take the old ones back [to Florida]. Women making that type of road trip] was unheard of, [and yet] we had the

opportunity to drive [it in] Corvettes. The guys trusted us with them, which was probably a huge mistake. But, driving to the Cape back and forth. No, women did not do that. I guess I had just a lot of confidence that I could do it.

WRIGHT: Doing the math, you were 18 to 25. That was the time period that you were off and working in a very male-dominated office.

COPLIN: Yes. With high achievers, high achievers.

WRIGHT: Military backgrounds, a lot of ego.

COPLIN: A lot of egos. A lot of the problem too in the office—not a problem, but most of those guys were test pilots. We had a couple of them that were called in from duty in Vietnam. They found out when they were in Vietnam that they had been selected for astronauts. Ron Evans was one of them that I remember. But they weren't used to desk jobs. These guys were pilots. They were flyers. So we had to help them understand what it meant to have an office. It was an adjustment for a lot of them to be in offices and have the routines and the meetings that were required.

WRIGHT: The GALs, as you mentioned that you have contact with again, were you all close as friends? Because you mentioned you were the baby, so the ages must have ranged somewhat in there.



COPLIN: There was a range. I think Charlotte Maltese was [four or] five years older than I was. Toni Zahn was probably ten years older. Gay and Penny Study were both probably in their early 40s maybe. But we were all close. We were a close group. We were close with the people in the appearance section [also], because they supported the guys in their post-flight appearances. We were good friends in the office and outside of the office.

WRIGHT: I have to imagine you had a lot of secrets. Not secrets as in secrets, but things that happened inside that office that just stayed inside that office that you were all pretty much compelled to keep there.

COPLIN: Yes. Yes, and that was just the nature of what was going on.

WRIGHT: On a related note to that, we wanted to ask you if you had some special memories that you can share with us about any of the missions. I know you've already talked about some, but just anything else that might have popped into your mind of working in there. Well, one I could ask you about is the Snoopy Award.

COPLIN: Yes. My Silver Snoopy—and I wish I could remember what year. I'd have to dig [the information] out. But it was in the late '60s. I think it was right around the Apollo 10, Apollo 11, because I did those back-to-back trips to the Cape.

WRIGHT: What astronaut gave it to you?

COPLIN: I think it was Slayton, and I think I've got a picture of it. I'm pretty sure.

WRIGHT: That's pretty special.

COPLIN: Yes, pretty special. Slayton, he was delightful. They all were. I had mentioned before that you have little snippets of memories and something will trigger, and I do remember the last time I saw Gus Grissom leaving the office when he was going to the Cape. I was headed down the hallway and he was going down the stairwell, and he stopped and turned and waved. That ended up being the last time that I saw him. I remember when I was babysitting one time for the Evanses, it was because Jan's mother was very ill, and Ron was at the Cape training, and so I went over at least a week, maybe longer than that, every night after work. I stayed with their two kids and got them up and got them off to school the next day, and then went to work and then came home and fixed dinner for them, like I knew what I was doing. I was like 23 years old. But I was like everyone else back then; I didn't know that I couldn't do it.

Those are [all] very special memories. Conrad and Kerwin and Weitz. Gordon Cooper, lovely accent; I just adored him. Mike Collins, I remember one time on an award that I received—I can't remember the exact circumstances of it, but I think it was before [Apollo] 11. Mike was training, and Mr. Peterson had come down and had said something about "Shepard wanted you to be put in for this award" or whatever it was, [and someone] hadn't had time to do it. Apparently Mike Collins overheard the conversation, and Mike sat down unknown to me and handwrote the [submission] for my award, [and I still have] his handwritten notes for [that] award. There were some good, special times.

WRIGHT: That is special times. Before we close today I was going to ask my colleagues here to see if they had any questions they had. Think of some? Jennifer has a question.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I have a few, if you don't mind.

COPLIN: Not at all.

ROSS-NAZZAL: One question I wanted to ask you. I was curious. You might be the person in the know. One of the things that I've been looking at—and I'm working on a larger article now—is about the wine and Skylab controversy. Since you worked with the Skylab 2 crew, and Kerwin as I understand it was one of the key proponents of bringing wine on board Skylab, I was wondering what are your memories of that?

COPLIN: Yes. Oh, boy, but I'm going to have to think about that. Oh.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's okay. I thought I would ask you.

COPLIN: No, I know exactly what you're talking about. I hate to say unless I really think about it. But I think the reason Kerwin was such a proponent of it was for religious purposes, to be able to take communion.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned so much about the astronaut office, and you mentioned of course the New 19. I was curious how did the office change when the Excess 11 [Astronaut Group 6] and the MOL [U.S. Air Force Manned Orbiting Laboratory] astronauts came on board.

COPLIN: They were integrated fairly easily. Now I think at some point sometimes they felt like maybe they were a little bit removed because they didn't come in through a regular selection. They were transferred over from the MOL Program. But if [so,] it was very brief. They became astronauts just like the NASA astronauts. There were very [few issues, if any,] that I remember. That [would have included Robert L.] Crippen and—let's see, [Henry W.] Hartsfield, [Jr.] was [also] MOL. [Robert F.] Overmyer.

WRIGHT: Test yourself, aren't you?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Overmyer and [Donald H.] Peterson.

COPLIN: Yes, Don Peterson. There was another one.

WRIGHT: [Richard H.] Truly.

COPLIN: Yes, Dick. Yes, how could I forget Dick Truly, yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was curious about dress and fashion at that time. What did you typically wear to work? Was there a requirement that women wear certain clothing?

COPLIN: Well, I'll tell you, there was a big flap over pantsuits. Yes, because we wore dresses, and I mean, women didn't wear suits back then, but we did wear dresses to work. Then with women's lib [liberation] of the '60s and everything, and I remember the first time I wore a pantsuit to work, and you would have thought it was—oh, my gosh, yes. But we dressed professionally. Now that said, the skirts were short, because it was the '60s. For some of us anyway, our skirts were a little bit shorter....

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did pantsuits become part of acceptable dress for women by the time you left?

COPLIN: Oh, yes, yes.

WRIGHT: You weren't going back.

COPLIN: No. I still preferred dresses. I remember that [pantsuits were] a nice change, but I wasn't quite into them. I think the women that were slightly older than I really took to the pantsuits, but I still felt like I needed to wear a dress.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When you first started with NASA, had you had some training in high school on things like typing and research skills?

COPLIN: Yes. I had taken typing courses. I had taken shorthand and had done that purposely, because that's what I was going to try to utilize. My intention was to get a job for a couple of

years and earn enough money [to] go to college. Then I ended up in the astronaut office, and [that plan] just went out the window. But, I was prepared and was hired by NASA because of the [courses I took while in high school].

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was there any extra time for additional training? Did NASA provide any?

COPLIN: Yes, [but most were elective, not] the type of [training] that was required. We were offered things that we were able to take advantage of [if we were interested]. I wish I could think of something, an example. But it would enhance our positions, our jobs, and give us the opportunity for maybe a couple of extra points when it came to applying for another job. Outside activities [also] counted. We had started the softball team, and the guys played on it sometimes. If not, they would umpire or referee. [NASA] encouraged [training and] extra, [outside] activities. I remember going to [numerous] training classes, [and] I've got all my certificates somewhere.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was just curious about that. The only other question that I had for you was how do you think that the Manned Spacecraft Center changed the Clear Lake area?

COPLIN: Oh, it changed it dramatically. It would have probably eventually had a degree of growth just because of the proximity to Houston. But it certainly accelerated it. With the arrival of the astronauts, Nassau Bay grew, and El Lago and Seabrook area, because most of the astronauts built their homes either in El Lago or Nassau Bay. That really promoted a lot of growth in the area as far as residential. Then of course commercial then followed that. I

remember the biggest growth taking place in the late '60s, the biggest changes. Because NASA Road 1 [now NASA Parkway] was just nothing. It was just nothing when MSC was built. Ellington, I think with NASA coming in, it gave Ellington another shot in the arm because of the T-38s being out there and the astronauts flying in and out of there. I think that helped Ellington hang on as long as it did.

WRIGHT: Did you commute back and forth from Dickinson? Or did you get your own place after a while?

COPLIN: I did for a number of years. When I went to the Cape the first time on Apollo 10, I was still living at home. Believe it or not, my mother and daddy drove me down there. [The Cape] had gotten an apartment [for me] to stay at while I was down there. That was the first time I had ever been on my own; I was 21 years old. My parents drove me to Florida and [got me settled, then returned to Dickinson]. I had a gray goose government car with no air conditioning in Florida, hotter than Hades, [and] could go only to work and back. If they caught you anywhere else in that thing you were history. Shepard was adamant [about us following all the rules while we were on TDY at the Cape]. You didn't [want to] get into any trouble whatsoever. Those that did never went back. After having been at the Cape, and [for] the first time away from home, when I came home I got my own apartment.

WRIGHT: You were ready.

COPLIN: I was ready, yes, I was ready. So by the time I came back from 11, I was actually ready to move out.

JOHNSON: You mentioned it was like a family. You were young. I was just curious about some of the socializing, and whether you had time, since you were working such long hours and doing the babysitting, if you had time, and if you socialized. You mentioned the picnics with the MSC personnel. We've talked to other people, and they've talked about how people tended to do things together. They'd go out to eat together. Did you also find that true?

COPLIN: Yes, yes, very much so. The astronaut office people went out [together]. It wasn't that [you] were trying to keep separate, it was a convenience factor, [and you were working the same hours]. "Hey, let's go." We had opportunities to [mingle], because back then happy hour was real popular—especially around here at the Nassau Bay Hotel and the Kings Inn. There were [also] some darn good splashdown parties. The launch parties at the Cape, that's where everybody wanted to be, and [then to] splashdown parties [here] in Houston. Yes, we partied hearty.

WRIGHT: Time to celebrate.

COPLIN: Time to celebrate, yes we did. But families, [and] the wives, [also] participated [and partied]. We had special times where their kids would have an opportunity to go to the circus. I remember riding a bus with a busload of astronaut children to the circus up at the old Sam Houston Coliseum. Oh, rowdiest bunch. I don't think I [volunteered] for that duty again.



But we did have a lot of interaction in that way. It made us all feel a little bit more connected. Gay [Alford] was very good about keeping [the secretaries working closely together because we needed to cover each other]. We called her mother superior, and still do. If [the astronauts] were coming up the back hallway from the simulator, and you were closer to them than going around the front of the office to ask their own secretary to do something, the guys didn't care, they'd pop in your office and ask you to do something, and you did it. That's why we all had to be pretty close and work as a real unit, as a tight unit, because you couldn't say, "No, I don't work for you, get around there to the other side."

WRIGHT: I guess it helped with all of the secretaries being close, because then there wasn't that territorial of—

COPLIN: Oh, there was territorial.

WRIGHT: Oh, was there?

COPLIN: Yes, but you got over it. You got over it. Those were coveted jobs. [The secretarial positions] were highly coveted jobs, [and] we were reminded that they were highly coveted jobs. There wasn't competition per se, but I think there was, [because] I know, personally, I wanted to be known as the best of the group. I think each one of us did.

WRIGHT: Were there rules, either written or unwritten, about socializing with the astronauts, as in on a personal basis, not as a family basis?

COPLIN: Not so much, because Admiral Shepard, his philosophy was, and he promoted it too, was that we were family. [But] there was nothing that I ever saw in writing or otherwise. I don't know that from the astronauts' standpoint, I don't know if anything was said to them about it. It was the unwritten rule, [but] there was nothing official or otherwise that I was ever aware of.

WRIGHT: We're curious about what you felt to be the most challenging aspect of your job during the seven years.

COPLIN: Probably, [that] we were required to wear so many hats. That was really the most challenging part of it. The work was so diversified, and it varied so much depending on which astronaut you were working for too. A lot of them had outside interests that you tried to help them with. But you were public relations, you were mother hen, you were a screener; it was a difficult job. I think that was probably the most challenging part of it, in addition to the having to be able to recognize the priorities when you're working with ten astronauts with varying [responsibilities on different] missions [and programs]. Each one of them thought their [work] was the most important and their mission was the most important. Having to prioritize, that was really tough, really tough trying to explain to them, "No, you have to wait in line, because this guy has,"—they were not used to that.

WRIGHT: Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us today? I think we've pretty much gone over our thoughts. Did you have any other thing you would like to add?

COPLIN: No, I don't think so. I'll probably think of a hundred things. None of it probably makes any difference whatsoever. That's okay too. There was just a lot of stuff [and] we were really so lucky. To this day I know how very lucky I was to be there at that time. Talk about stumbling into something, it was just tremendous.

WRIGHT: Well, it sounds like a truly exciting moment that just kept going on for seven years. We thank you for giving us your time this afternoon and sharing that with us.

COPLIN: Thank you. I hope it was worth your time.

WRIGHT: Oh, it is. Thank you so much.

[End of interview]