

Martha Mitchell: Capital's Most Talked-About Talkative Woman

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WASHINGTON — People in Pine Bluff, Ark., remember Martha Elizabeth Beall as a deep-dimpled, happy-go-lucky, headstrong, highstrung girl who was never at a loss for words.

"She was a talker," said her older half-brother, Quincy Nash. "She said what she thought."

And when Martha was graduated from Pine Bluff High School in 1937, they inscribed this beside her picture in the Zebra yearbook:

*"I love its gentle warble,
I love its gentle flow,
I love to wind my tongue up,
and I love to let it go."*

At the age of 51, Martha Beall (as in belle, Southern) Mitchell is still at it, but her warble has sharpened with age. The wife of Attorney General John V. Mitchell has delighted and infuriated thousands with her tart tongue and outspoken ways: letters written to her range from suggestions that she run for President to keeping her "big mouth shut."

She is the most talked-about, talkative woman in Washington.

Mrs. Mitchell emerged almost immediately as the most colorful of the Nixon Cabinet spouses. A flamboyant blonde, partial to sling

back pumps, dangling earrings and glitter, she quickly proved to be an enthusiastic party-goer at night and den mother during the day to Cabinet wives.

It was Mrs. Mitchell, for instance, who organized get-acquainted - with - your - Government tours and a narcotics conference for Cabinet and sub-Cabinet level ladies.

But none of this got beyond the Washington women's pages until Nov. 21, 1969, six days after the gigantic anti-Vietnam march on the Capital. In a TV interview, Mrs. Mitchell said her husband had compared the demonstration before the Justice Department to the Russian Revolution and thought some American liberals were worse than "Russian Communists."

Celebrity on Own

Overnight she became that rare item in Washington—a political wife who was a celebrity on her own, drawing more attention than the President's wife and most of Mr. Nixon's Cabinet. At public banquets and private parties, she was greeted with applause, cheers or sympathetic jokes and laughter. Her husband, who calls her "Doll" or "Gorgeous," gazed on fondly.

But the reaction was mixed with anger. For meantime,

behind the scenes that month, Martha Mitchell was lobbying for Supreme Court nominee Clement Haynsworth, her husband's choice, in a most unorthodox way.

The Attorney General's wife made a stream of documented phone calls described variously by the recipients as "threatening," "incredible" and "vile and nasty." The calls were to Senators' wives and staffs, telling them that if the Senators did not vote for Mr. Haynsworth, she would campaign on "national television" against their reelection. The languages he used was described as "strong and colorful" by the No. 1 aide to Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee.

Senator J. William Fulbright said his wife was "so mad" after the call from Mrs. Mitchell that "she almost had a heart attack."

Soon thereafter, Mrs. Mitchell granted an interview to Time magazine in which she complained about the move to Washington as a financial comedown (Mr. Mitchell made \$250,000 a year as a municipal bond lawyer in Manhattan; his Cabinet salary is \$60,000).

"I think the Government should give us free housing" she said, indicating displeasure at paying \$140,000 for their duplex Washington apartment. "We'll be happy

to go back and make some money."

That interview also contained this comment on protest:

"Any time you get somebody marching in the streets, it's catering to revolution. It started with the colored people in the South. Now other groups are taking to the streets. We could have worked out the integration battle without allowing them to march."

"My family worked for everything we had. We even have a deed from the King of England for property in South Carolina (where her mother came from). Now these jerks come along and try to give it to the Communists."

Call to Newspaper

Then, on April 9, 1970, came Mrs. Mitchell's middle-of-the-night calls to the Arkansas Gazette in which she said, "I want you to crucify Fulbright," because he voted against the confirmation of G. Harrold Carswell for the Supreme Court about 13 hours earlier.

Gazette editors and reporters say there were several telephone calls in the space of one hour, between 1:50 A.M. and 3 A.M. E.S.T., crucial parts of which were tape-recorded. Those who listened in reported that Mrs.



Mitchell occasionally sobbed as she spoke about criticism of her husband, herself and the President.

Some of her remarks were also interspersed with giggles, according to The Gazette staff.

When Senator Fulbright learned of the call, his amused reaction was: "She overstates the case a little. It was just a manner of speech." His wife said: "She's quite an unstable one, isn't she, calling a newspaper long distance at 2 or 3 in the morning?"

"I love her, that's all I have to say," said Mr. Mitchell hours later.

For a while, up to 400 letters a day flowed in from the public, 10 to 1, favorable, and Mrs. Mitchell had to hire herself a press secretary.

Martha Beall Mitchell is not used to being the center of a storm: she has led a favored and protected life. She was born on Sept. 2, 1918 in the small city of Pine Bluff to Arie Ferguson and George Virgil Beall.

Her father was a cotton broker, one of the most affluent men in town. Her mother, who gave private speech and diction lessons, was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

One of the teachers re-

members that "Martha had a good mind when she used it—but she never used it. She was a pretty, happy, empty-headed little girl."

A high school classmate said: Those things in the paper sure sound like her. She always had something to say, but she enjoyed herself. She just had fun. Whatever she was doing, she just had fun."

She left Pine Bluff to go to Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., then transferred to the University of Arkansas. A sorority sister and roommate, Mrs. Jess Reeves, noted that "Martha loved to dress up, she really liked to talk, too. She chattered, but not in a catty way."

Transferred Once Again

Bad weather in Fayetteville worsened a sinus condition, and Martha Beall transferred once again, to the University of Miami in Florida. She was graduated, with a major in history, a minor in education and "average" grades, in 1942.

She then taught seventh grade in Mobile, Ala., for one year and recalls succinctly, "I despised it." She returned to Pine Bluff, got a secretarial job at the arsenal there and went with its commanding general to a similar job in Washington, D.C., in 1945.

She soon met Clyde Jennings, now a traveling



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Mrs. John N. Mitchell in her Washington home

sportswear salesman living in Virginia, then a serviceman on duty at the War Department in the Capital. They were married on Oct. 5, 1946 and moved to New York, where Mrs. Mitchell spent the better part of 25 years. Their son Jay was born Nov. 2, 1947.

Those who knew the Jennings in those years said the two had little in common and gradually grew apart. Martha played bridge, collected recipes and entertained. Both she and her husband, according to friends, were politically conservative and were strongly against the 1954 Supreme Court decision ordering school desegregation.

The couple was divorced Aug. 1, 1957. Shortly thereafter, Martha Beall Jennings met John Mitchell in New York. He was then married to his first wife, Betty, by whom he had two children, John Jr., now a New York lawyer, and Mrs. Edwin C. Reed.

Moved to Rye

John and Martha were married Dec. 3, 1957. Their only child, Martha, called "Marty," was born Jan. 10, 1961. The Mitchells moved to Rye, N. Y., in 1964.

Mr. Mitchell described the house, which they sold last year, as "beautifully decorated" by his wife. Their three-bedroom apartment in Washington at the swank Watergate East is equally formal and has what one observer called, "that 'House & Garden' look, without a single masculine touch."

The Mitchells live there

with 9-year-old Marty and the white family poodle, Buttons. Although the Attorney General and his wife are Protestant, they send Marty to the exclusive Stone Ridge Country Day School in Bethesda, Md., run by the Roman Catholic nuns of the Sacred Heart.

The reason, said Mrs. Mitchell, is that "there has been no discipline of children" for the last 20 years. "Today the Roman Catholics are about the only ones that have discipline."

Has 'Thin Skin'

The Mitchells appear to be devoted to one another; thus Mrs. Mitchell, who says she has a "thin skin," finds it "hard to take the criticism of my husband, my poor husband."

A Justice Department staff member agreed:

"She's not used to being a political wife. She takes any criticism of Mitchell as criticism of her. She takes his defeats as her defeats. She hasn't learned yet, like other political wives, that politics is an impersonal affair."

Asked about his wife's outbursts, Mr. Mitchell replies: "What else can I do, but let her speak? She has no inclination to be quiet. She's not politically motivated, she's just saying what she feels. Nobody around here (in the Administration) tries to throttle her."

And so, when someone says, "Guess what Martha did today?" nobody in Washington ever asks, "Martha who?"