

Passport Gadfly Does It Again

WASHINGTON — (CNS) — If the State Department ever tries to repeal the holiday season, you can blame Frances Knight.

The spunky little red-haired career woman who has turned the U.S. Passport Office into one of the most efficient agencies in government, and one of its few profit-making ventures, has done it again.

She has written another holiday letter to her friends.

The one she wrote in 1969 touched off a congressional investigation. The 1970 version may have President Nixon aiming some embarrassing questions at Secretary of State William Rogers and his administrative chiefs.

Urgent Fund Need

Miss Knight directs a work force of more than 500 people that operated on a budget of \$7.5 million this year, issued over 2 million passports and deposited \$20,795,123 in the U.S. Treasury, a net profit of \$13,224,632.

Despite this, Miss Knight says, she can't get the personnel or the funds for three more regional offices and new facilities that are urgently needed.

The State Department top administrative echelons, she charges, are "adamantly against" decentralizing the passport office, are "not interested" in improving service to the public, are determined to force her out of her position and attach little if any importance to the passport and citizenship function.

"I think it's a helluva important function," she snaps from behind a busy desk.

Not Interested

"The State Department doesn't think so because it's not a diplomatic function. The department is not interested in service.

"I've been in this job for 15 years and a Secretary of State has never set foot in the Passport Office."

Rogers, who hasn't made Miss Knight's "most admired" list in his first two



FRANCES KNIGHT

May embarrass Rogers

years as Secretary, might make a visit if he reads her latest letter.

During 1970, she writes, "the Passport Office was surveyed and studied to distraction, but with no noticeable results.

Costly Surveys

"In the last 15 years we have survived 32 management, operations and administrative surveys. If the total cost of personnel, travel, consultations, time and effort expended by these extensive and non-productive studies had been applied to giving the Passport Office urgently needed personnel and facilities, we would have few, if any, problems remaining.

"The simple fact is that all Passport Office recommendations for improving our service have been delayed, pigeonholed or vetoed by self-styled passport experts."

The top five persons in her own office have 208 years of combined passport - citizenship experience.

"We know what we're doing and what we need to do it better," she bristles.

Can't Keep Pace

Without additional funds and personnel, she says, the office will not be able to keep pace with the travel explosion of the seventies.

"People don't realize it," she said, "but international

travel has become the third largest business in the United States. "It ranks behind only steel and automobiles."

The office currently has a holiday season backlog of 3000 applications. A test authorizing 19 post offices to accept passport applications has not been successful in its first six months, Miss Knight said.

Errors are found in about 20 percent of such applications.

"Instead of handling them ourselves, we're spending more time on the corrections," she said.

Key Factor

A key factor in Miss Knight's struggle with the State Department bureaucracy seems to lie in her own basic view of what a passport is.

"It is a legal document," she said. "It is a mark of citizenship. No one can place too high a value on it. Its integrity must be maintained at all costs.

"And the integrity of this office must be maintained. We are like the Internal Revenue Service in the sense that we handle personal, privileged information on 8.5 million Americans. It is a quasi-judicial responsibility."

Miss Knight's insistence on rigid security measures and her refusal to bend passport requirements for sometimes

prominent, sometimes notorious individuals have sparked anger more than once. But her starched determination to carry out the rules has won her millions of friends, including powerful voices on Capitol Hill and four Presidents.

Lyndon Johnson called her to the White House in the closing days of his administration to congratulate her. President Nixon has made public statements admiring her integrity.

But for three consecutive years, the State Department has refused Miss Knight's request for three additional passport agencies and improved facilities. Agencies are now in operation in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, New Orleans and Seattle.

Her budget limited her frantic New York office to two telephone operators during last summer's travel rush.

Even Miss Knight's pay status has apparently become involved in her feud. A routine increase in her Civil Service salary to match the level of the Foreign Service officer who directs the much smaller U.S. Visa Office has been snarled in bureaucratic red tape.

"It's not the money that's important, it's the principle," says Miss Knight.