

A Conversation with
Vesta Spencer Taylor

Interviewed by Dick Bertel
in 1965

INTEVIEWEE: Vesta Spencer Taylor (1884-1971)
INTERVIEWER: Dick Bertel
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TAYLOR. Vesta Spencer Taylor

SILLIMAN: This cassette recording is being reproduced by Bob Silliman, Director of the Windsor Historical Society, in February 1984. Early in 1983, Windsor's 350th anniversary year, Sandra L. Trice of St. Augustine, Florida, visited Fyler House [in 2008 known as the 1758 John and Sarah Strong House]. We were pleased to learn that Sandra was the great granddaughter of Christopher Miner Spencer. During her visit, I let her listen to a recording made by her grandfather, Charles F. Taylor, on the subject of the Bissell Ferry, which had crossed the Connecticut River for some 275 years, and the yeast man who made his rounds of Windsor selling liquid yeast at the end of the 19th century. It was learned during our visit that Sandra had in her possession an interview of her grandmother, Vesta Spencer Taylor, by a local radio personality, Dick Bertel, who was then working at WTIC. Mr. Bertel is still in the greater Hartford area on station WKSS. The interview concerned the life of Christopher Miner Spencer and his many accomplishments from the Spencer rifle to the automatic screw machine. This recording made in 1965 at the Windsor home of Vesta Spencer Taylor follows in its entirety. On the opposite side of the cassette is the recording by Charles F. Taylor, Sandra's grandfather, made in 1962.

BERTEL: I'm visiting today in the home [at 26 Olin Street] of Mrs. Vesta Spencer Taylor in Windsor, Connecticut. Recently I did a broadcast with Mr. E. P. Luddy of the Hartford Civil War Roundtable in which he discussed at some length Christopher Miner Spencer, who invented the Spencer Repeating Rifle, perhaps better known as the Spencer Seven Shooter. It was this rifle which, in Mr. Luddy's opinion, ended the Civil War. And I received a phone call after that broadcast from Mrs. Vesta Spencer Taylor in Windsor saying, "Mr. Bertel, I don't know if you know about it or not; but you were discussing my father." Well, this was the beginning of a rather intriguing conversation, and I am visiting at the home of Mrs. Taylor now for the purpose of discussing her father.

Well, Mrs. Taylor, we are bridging a hundred years actually in the course of our conversation, aren't we? When was it that...well, may I ask first of all, when you were born?

TAYLOR: I was born on the fifth of August 1884 when my father was 51 years old.

BERTEL: Now, your father, of course, had been born, I believe, in 1833 here in Connecticut. He had met Mr. Lincoln personally to demonstrate his Spencer Repeating Rifle, and that's a part of our story which you are going to tell a little later. But, first of all, let me ask you about some of your earliest

recollections of your father, Christopher Miner Spencer. What sort of a man was he do you recall?

TAYLOR: Well, I think he was always perhaps more than generous. I don't feel that he was ever impatient. He guided us children (there were two brothers and a sister who died in infancy), but never with any harshness that I can recall. Of course sometimes, you know, years put things into oblivion; but I have only the recollection of only the kindest of treatment from him and that really is verified again and again by people older now who were in our household as we were children. That's one thing that they remember. One thing I remember particularly when we were, as we called it then, "the crowd," I suppose it would be a "gang" now, where we had rolled up the rugs and were dancing and making a good deal of noise and someone asked father if he'd minded, and he said, "Oh gosh, no. I don't mind how much noise you make as long as there is no quarrelling." That was really his whole feeling. He didn't want quarrelling.

BERTEL: I'm sure that that speaks for Mr. Spencer's character. Now, he was active from an early age in the field of mechanics, wasn't he? First of all, where was he born and was he associated with Manchester, Connecticut? Was that where he was born?

04:49.9

TAYLOR: Yes. His grandparents on his mother's side, the Hollister family and his own grandparents, Silas Spencer, were all born and lived in Manchester, a part of Manchester, either Manchester or South Manchester. It was south of the center. He was born there on Hackmatack Street in 1833, the 20th of June. He was one of eight children. He had brothers and sisters. I think he was the fifth down the line. His grandfather Spencer, Silas Spencer, ran a farm or had a farm, and he spent some time there, but not to really live with him. When he was eleven years old, he went down the road a piece to live with his grandfather Hollister, Josiah Hollister, who was a Revolutionary [War] patriot. He was a man who had been very much interested in working with metals. He had made several guns. Some of them were used during the Revolution but not in production. It simply was that they were available. He also was a man who did a great deal with wood work. Father had his first inspiration, I think, for working with guns or the thought of perhaps...I don't think he planned then to make guns, but he was interested because his grandfather gave him the old flintlock. Father wanted to modernize that even at the age of twelve, as he was then. So he took an old case knife and made a hacksaw of it by hitting the edge of the case knife on an ax so that he could saw the end of the barrel to his liking. I don't know if there is any family record as to how great grandfather felt about that, but that's what he did. From that time on he really was very much interested in the workings of guns.

BERTEL: Well, he went to work for the Cheney Mills, didn't he, not too long after that?

TAYLOR: It was in the summer of 1847 and at that time the Cheney Silk Mills were the total building was only 60 by 40 feet. They had an overshot wheel and the wheel turned the ___ [power?] for the machinery. Then Father in 1850 went back again to the Cheney Brothers as a journeyman machinist. In the meantime he had served sixteen months apprenticeship at the machine shop of Samuel Loomis at Manchester Center. That is his only formal education aside from the little district schools in Manchester was that winter when he spent one term at Wilbraham Academy. He was at the silk mill about three years. Mr. Frank Cheney, he was closely associated with Mr. Frank Cheney, he was the ruling spirit in the work of the factory, Father felt. He was interested in everything at one time. He was very interested in Father's mechanical ingenuity, gave [him?] opportunity to make a good deal of experimental machinery, and finally led him into the line of inventions.

BERTEL: Now how many hours a day did your father work? What was the average length of his day at that time, do you recall?

TAYLOR: Yes. Eleven hours a day. Later when he came to invent or produce a gun, the working model, it took him about two years and it was all made in wood to exact scale. That was done entirely outside of his working time in the Cheney Mills.

BERTEL: And the Cheney Brothers encouraged him, didn't they, to continue work on the gun?

08:11.1

TAYLOR: Oh yes. They did. They felt that it was the thing for him to do because... Well, the first thing that he did, the first invention that he had was for a silk winder that he invented while he was working there. I recall that he said when it was perfected, that winder could do the work of seven girls. I suppose that was sort of the beginning of automation. He said the girls didn't like it a bit.

BERTEL: Oh, I can image they wouldn't because he was putting people out of work, but nevertheless as you point out, this began to indicate his mechanical ability and his inventiveness.

TAYLOR: Yes, I think so. He said at one time that that device was used finally so universally that the patent expired, and it was used at the Colt's mills in England. In fact at one time they asked him to come over there and supervise some of the setting up of the machinery for using that device.

BERTEL: Now when was his Spencer Repeating Rifle ready for test trials and so on?

TAYLOR: Well, the patent was issued. The application was made for the patent, and it was granted the 6th of March in 1860. That was when war [Civil War] seemed to be inevitable. Military companies were being organized. The whole spirit of the country seemed to be, you know, tended toward war. So Father was more

desirous than ever to have a repeating gun that could replace the muzzle loaders. He realized that the time consumed and the difficulty of carrying the ammunition and getting it into all of the muzzle loaders was a deterrent, and that if he could get a repeating gun that could fire more rounds per minute than the old muzzle loaders that it would be something to our advantage. That is the advantage of the North. Mr. Charles Cheney became very interested; and, through his efforts with the help of a gun expert, they finally got the gun into production.

BERTEL: Now this gun was all metal in construction, wasn't it, and so were the bullets.

TAYLOR: Yes, the bullets and the gun. I may be wrong, but I think it was rimfire bullets. They were all metal bullets.

BERTEL: Wasn't there some sort of a test in sand made of the rifle?

TAYLOR: Yes, there is the story that one of the men who didn't believe that it could do all the things they said and he didn't believe in the durability of it. I've forgotten which one of the officers it was. He had it buried in sand and covered with water, and it was left for quite a period of time. When it was taken out and dried, it worked just as well as it had before.

BERTEL: Well, I think that speaks pretty well for the design of the gun. Now, Civil War historians today say that if a Spencer rifle had been adopted earlier in the war, [the] war could not have lasted as long as it did and many, many lives would have been saved. Yet it was not readily accepted by officials in Washington [D. C.]. What was the problem here? Why the delays?

TAYLOR: Well, the first of the guns, they were accepted through Mr. Cheney's friendship with Gideon Welles. He was Secretary of the Navy. The first guns after the company was formed and they were ready to manufacture in Boston, the first order was for 1,000 guns which were to be given to use by the Navy. Then after that order was filled and there seemed to be not any more coming, they tried to get through to the War Department to have orders given. But, Mr. Ripley, was it Colonel Ripley [Brig. General James W. Ripley], was connected with the Springfield Armory [Springfield, MA]. Wouldn't there be something about that now if you had an interest in the Springfield Armory and you were an officer in the Army ? [laughter] Well, anyway, he would have no part of it. He felt that it was a new-fangled gimcrack and there was just no use whatever in trying to fuss around with it. I remember Father said at one time that many people were skeptical because there was quite an influx of suggestions. I understand that President Lincoln had a great many things sent to him that wouldn't amount to anything, but people felt that they would. I think that they probably...we'll give him the credit. Perhaps Ripley felt that this was something, just another one of those things. Finally, Mr. Welles suggested that Father go down to Washington [D. C.] and see President Lincoln; and that is

when he had what he called one of his most memorable experiences. I think Father went unaccompanied from Boston. When he got down there, he went right to the White House and was ushered into the president's office. He was carrying his gun, which had only a cloth case on it. No one interfered, the president greeted him, and Father took the case off the gun, and laid the gun on the desk. Lincoln handled it, looked it over a bit, and he said, "Well now. Let's see the inwardness of the thing." So Father with only a screwdriver took the gun apart, showed him [President Lincoln] all of the inwardnesses of it, showed him how it worked, and with the screwdriver put it back again. That was always needed to take that apart or to replace parts that might become broken or need replacing. Lincoln approved and then said, "Well now, I'd like to try this out. I think I'd like to go down, I think I'd like to shoot it. I'd like to try it out." So I think it was the next day at 2 o'clock Father went and Lincoln was ready to go and they had a board about 3 feet long and 8 inches wide that had a black smudge on each end for a target. With a Navy official and young Robert Lincoln, Father and Mr. Lincoln went down across through the weeds, across toward where the Washington Monument now stands. There they set up the target. Mr. Lincoln looked around and he said "I guess we'd better move that. I seem to see a colored gentleman down over there, and we don't want to do anything to harm him." So they changed the location of the target, and Lincoln shot first. Of course there were seven shots. The first one hit the bull's eye. The rest were grouped around it. Mr. Lincoln, after he had finished, said "Well now we'll let the inventor try it." Well, of course Father was in better practice; and he really made a real bull's eye target. I don't know how many he hit, but a real good target. Lincoln said, "Well, you're a younger man than I am. You have a steadier nerve and a better eye." So he passed it off that way. Someone questioned this at one time when we were talking about it, and they said well that can't be so because Lincoln had been a hunter all his life. He would have made a better bull's eye than that. Someone told me that there's quite a difference in shooting at a permanent target than shooting at, say, a running squirrel or something that was moveable. So that may have been one reason that he didn't make it better.

14:58.8

17:45.3

BERTEL: Did Mr. Lincoln want to place some orders for your father's rifle?

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. He felt that it should be done, and he insisted; and the orders were placed for quite a good many so the company felt justified in going ahead with the manufacture. Of course, after the thing that interested Father particularly held his attention for a good many years after this incident was that after the shooting match, one of the men who was with them, one of the Navy officials, sawed the board in two and he handed the end of the board at which Lincoln had made his target to Father. Father brought it home, and he kept it until about 1883. Then the *Army and Navy Journal* suggested that that it might be a good thing to have that. Knowing that he had it, they approached him and suggested that he send it to Springfield, Illinois, to be placed with other Lincoln memorabilia. As late as 1912, it was there. It's sad to have to report that in

trying to find that, when one of our family visited there, they were told by the curator that they knew nothing about it. We are hoping that sometime because there were a good many books and other effects of Lincoln's that had been placed in the memorial building were moved when other buildings were made. So it may yet turn up and be available, but it would be too bad to have that lost. 19:33.2

BERTEL: Well now, let's get back to Mr. Lincoln and his reaction to the rifle. He insisted that orders be placed for the rifle to be put into the hands of members of the Union Army. He was still opposed by Col. Ripley, I believe, and what eventually happened to Col. Ripley?

TAYLOR: Well Col. Ripley was allowed to leave [laughter]. He really was dismissed. I don't know how soon after that, but he was in such opposition to any progress of that sort and was still insisting on the old Springfields. President Lincoln saw to it that he was relieved. 20:06.0

BERTEL: Isn't there a story concerning Mr. Lincoln and your father and the pins?

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. While they were on their way down to the place where the targets had been set up, Mr. Lincoln asked his son Robert to go over to where Secretary of War [Edwin] Stanton's office and ask him to come along and see the thing shoot. While they were waiting there, Mr. Lincoln noticed that the corner of his pocket of his alpaca jacket or coat was torn a bit. He reached up under the lapel of his vest and took out a pin and pinned up the corner and said, "Well, that doesn't look very good for the Chief Justice of this mighty republic, does it?" He laughed. When Robert got back there, he said well Mr. Stanton was too busy to come. Lincoln said, "Ah, well. They do just about as they've a mind to over there."

BERTEL: So I guess even then Mr. Lincoln had difficulties with members of his cabinet as many presidents since have had difficulty. Your father actually went to the front lines at times, didn't he, and he did meet General Grant, didn't he?

TAYLOR: Yes, he went down with the Army of the Cumberland and he was with General Grant and one of the officers, Mr. Dahlgren [Capt. John A. Dahlgren] gave him a letter requesting the officers to show him every attention. This was to demonstrate to the people who were using the gun the best way to use it and to instruct them really in the use of it. When I think of the travel and the conditions at that time to go, we think nothing of it now. It was quite an event.

BERTEL: I can imagine it was, as you point out, especially at that time when travel was so difficult. Well, what happened to the Spencer rifle following the war?

TAYLOR: Well, they did have quite a number, as I have said, of guns ordered. After the close of the war, the remaining guns and the patents were sold to the Winchester Arms Company in New Haven. They didn't manufacture them

anymore. Father always felt that it was because they felt that it would infringe in some way on something they were trying to do, trying to make.

BERTEL: Let's talk more about your father's career following the war and his development of the Spencer rifle. He again became interested, did he, in the mechanization of various industries around Connecticut?

TAYLOR: Yes. I think it was in 1859 that he and Mr. Charles Billings organized the Billings and Spencer Company for the manufacture of drop forgings machines, a screw machine. Then in 1876, I think, that the company was organized to manufacture the screw machines in quantity, and that was the beginning of the Hartford Machine Screw Company. Of course the machines have been used universally in so many places. I have a picture of the first machine, and then as that went on for many years, his final effort was in making the multiple-spindle screw machine in New Britain. After that, and in between he had, in 1883, he invented and manufactured under the Spencer Repeating Arms Company here in Windsor, the shotgun. That was used and sold in great quantities. I had, until I gave it to the [Windsor] Historical Society here in Windsor, the order book for that factory. Among others was the order for a gun to be sent to this little town in Turkey with the number of rounds of ammunition. Father had gone in 1883 after his second marriage. He had gone in 1883 to Europe to demonstrate the gun in England and before some of the powers in Germany. It was after that, you see, that the sultan in Turkey wanted the gun. They were never in quantity, but he had that individual gun.

25.30.0

BERTEL: Well, that must have been something for you to see in that order book, too. Tell me about the steamboat that your father developed and one which plied the Connecticut River or the Farmington River or both?

TAYLOR: Oh, both. Starting in the Farmington, the Farmington was then a little more navigable than it is now, particularly at the opening of the Farmington into the Connecticut which is, I guess, pretty well closed by a sandbar now. Father had been interested in hunting, and he had some rather unusual hunting boats he carried, sort of portable boats, that he carried when he went hunting up in the Adirondacks. The first boat that he had was an 18-foot boat almost entirely occupied by the boiler, steam boiler. It was on that boat, my family tells me, my father did tell me, that I took my first trip down the Connecticut River 79 years ago. Although I don't remember it, that was my first experience. In 1885 the keel was laid for the second steamboat that he had. The first one was called the *Zeph* and the second one the *Luzette*. It was a boat that was 39 feet overall with a water line of 36 feet and very shallow draft, only 2 feet 6 inches. That was because he was able to, with the mechanism attached to the steering wheel, he was able to raise with a sort of universal joint, I think they called it, the rudder post and rudder up from the water so that didn't drag as they went near a shore. That boat was built, as I say, in 1885, and I had my last trip on that boat in 1936. For many years and all through our childhood days Mother

and Father had spent many hours on the [Long Island] Sound and down the river and all the various ports. He was very fond of blue fishing. He used to take the neighbors and friends and usually came home with a big load of blue fish. 28:01.8

BERTEL: When you said, Mrs. Taylor, that you rode in it last in 1936, was it still powered by steam by any chance?

TAYLOR: No. My brother Roger, who was very mechanical also, changed the design of the stern of the boat and installed a six-cylinder Buick automobile engine converted for use in the boat. The last time I saw that, it was about 1942 when we were going over the bridge at New London in a little cove near the edge of the Thames River, we saw the boat. My brother sold it sometime after Father's death in [19] '22. Who had it and what became of it after that, I don't know. Of course it had copper sheeting on the outside, plates of about 12 inches square of copper all over the hull. Between that and the outside and the inside frame, Father had ground cork which absorbed the moisture so that it never molded, anything of that sort. It never leaked.

BERTEL: Well it must have been quite a boat, to say the least, and I'm sure you have very fond memories of it. Your father died in 1922 at the age of 89, and ten days before his death he was still going to work regularly, I understand. 29:48.1

TAYLOR: Yes. He died in January in 1922 and he would have been 89 in June. He had worked for the New Britain Machine Company. He had designed his last multiple-spindle screw machine for production by that company. He had been in the screw machine company, the Universal in Hartford, and wanted to make some changes. He was really opposed by one or two people who felt that what they had was good enough. He finally just left them, and I remember one day he seemed quite disturbed, and I said, "Well, Dad. What's wrong?" He said, "Well maybe they think they've put me on the junk heap, but I've got a lot left in this old head of mine." He immediately started on some drawings for a new machine or an improved machine. I remember one time when he was living with us then in Hartford, I went upstairs and he was standing with his drawing board on top of his old desk, and I said "Goodness. Aren't you going to go to bed pretty soon?" He said, "Oh yes, I guess so." Well, when I got up in the morning, he was there at the drawing board and I said, "Have you been up here all night?" "No. No." he said. "I slept on it, and when I woke up, it was clear as a bell." So Mr. Brown of the New Britain Machine Company was very interested in having him go ahead with that machine. He was 78 [years old] at that time. Mr. Brown of the New Britain Machine Company gave him every facility and all the men he needed to work with it to perfect the machine and get it ready to go into production and gave him a salary of \$50 a month [laughter]. For that time and his expenses. On the day of his 80th birthday, the first screw came off of that new machine, and I still have that screw. We had planned a surprise birthday party for him. Among the guests was Mr. Frank 31:09.0

Cheney, who was so delighted to come. Of course Mr. Charles Cheney was older and he had died, but Mr. Frank Cheney came to the party.

BERTEL: Mr. Frank Cheney must have been of an advanced age as well.

TAYLOR: Oh yes, he was. He was older than Father.

BERTEL: Isn't it exciting to know that somebody like your father on his 80th birthday has such a rich reward as to see this machine finally functioning? It certainly shows that it's important to live every minute of one's life.

TAYLOR: Father remained there, you see. That was when he was 80 [years old] and he remained there until just ten days before his death. He received an abundant royalty when the machines were in production. Those machines are used in all parts of the world now, really. I wish I understood the mechanics of it better, but those machines could take a coil of wire and make a product as small as the smallest screw in a watch up to big bolts depending on how the cams were located on the cam wheel and the size of the material fed into the machine.

BERTEL: Well, I believe that in reading about your father he had developed a cam which is used in a great many machines today in which his patent lawyer overlooked and never bothered to describe in the patents.

33:46.7

TAYLOR: Yes, I'm sure it is. For some little time after Father's death until the end of life of the patent, my brothers and I received money from the New Britain Machine Company, too. For a long while after that, I used to hear frequently from Mr. Brown and they just enjoyed him a lot. Father was 85 years old when he fractured his hip. They were having a big celebration of some sort at the New Britain Machine, and Father was laid up with the fractured hip. Old Dr. Sweet took care of him at his home and he had a fracture bed and a special nurse. New Britain Machine arranged to have a telephone connection so Father could talk with the people assembled for the banquet. Father never used a cane after he was able to walk, and he said, "What do you want me to do? Trip up and break the other leg?" The way it happened in the first place was he was coming home from one of the early automobile shows down at the old armory at the end of Mulberry Street, I think, down there? On a piece of ice about the size of a 50-cent piece down by Rapley's [?] Drug Store, he slipped and that was the fracture. Up to that time he had continued his early interest in hunting. He used to tramp sometimes as many as 20 miles a day with a friend maybe 20 years his junior in a hunting club out at Willington, Connecticut.

BERTEL: That's interesting. Well now, here is a man... Well, perhaps I should not refer to your father but to you, Mrs. Taylor. Your life in a very real sense has spanned the period of time between two of our martyred presidents: Abraham Lincoln, with whom your father had an association, a very important association, in demonstrating his rifle to him personally, and in our own time

President Kennedy. Now what was the connection between the Spencer Rifle and President Kennedy?

TAYLOR: Well, on President Kennedy's last birthday, one of his army officials presented him with a Spencer Rifle. Prior to that, we had some pictures of it. Many people knew that we'd be interested. There had been published a book called *The American Gun* in which there was an account of Father's life and pictures of the target at which Lincoln shot and other mementos. My younger brother out in California thought it would be nice if President Kennedy should have one of those books, so he wrote the White House and received an answer from one of the president's secretaries that he would be very pleased to have it. So my brother wrote a little inscription in the book. This is my brother Percival [Percival Hopkins Spencer] who was inventive, too, and much younger than I. He wrote in the book, then sent it to me to put my inscription in and my greetings to President Kennedy. It was sent back to the White House. My brother received a very cordial letter from President Kennedy thanking him for it, thanking us for it, and saying he would have it placed among his permanent collection. He had had the gun placed on the wall above his desk in his office. We also wondered if, as we know that he had Lincoln's desk, if that gun also had been placed on that same desk. 36:14.6

BERTEL: The irony, of course, in the desk and the bridging of time, actually, between, as I said, between two martyred presidents and their interest in the Spencer carbine. Well, Mrs. Taylor, you must gain a great deal of satisfaction in being able to look back over the years knowing that your father developed such an important device, which I'm sure ended the war [Civil War] much sooner than it would have ended ordinarily, knowing that your father knew President Lincoln personally. How does it feel to look back over these years?

TAYLOR: Well, I wouldn't like to think for a moment of what it would be without him. I want to say that in every effort that he made... Of course, my mother, who was his second wife, was not living at the time of his efforts for the Civil War. After that, it didn't matter what he was attempting to do, she backed it up thoroughly. She was a very capable person herself and seemed to understand what all the mechanics of the various things that Father was interested in. I think he felt... She died when he was... Well she died in 1906, so he lived a good many years afterwards. I think that he felt always that it was her interest and her courage and encouragement of what he wanted to undertake that meant a great deal to him as it, of course, did to all of us. 38:06.3

BERTEL: Well, I'm sure that they were both wonderful people and that, Mrs. Taylor, I want to thank you very much for allowing me to visit with you in your home here in Windsor so that we might share the story of your father, Christopher Miner Spencer. Thank you so very much.

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