AFSC, 191948:

Sibyl's interest in ancient keyboard instruments had become intense. During a visit to Europe in 1948, intended in the first instance to visit in-laws who had recently re-emerged from their war retreat in the South of France, she visited the harpsichordist Marcelle de La Cour, who not only showed Sibyl her own collection of musical instruments but also introduced her to other luminaries of this select world. Among them was Paul Brunold, who "held" Couperin's old organ at St. Germain. He took her to attend mass in the organ loft of Notre Dame. On successive Sundays, she sat on the organ bench at St. Gervais and then climbed to the loft of Notre Dame, while the Comte de St. Germain played the Savaille-Coll for numerous invited guests.

Many evenings she would attend the Jeunesse Musicale choral group, where young singers were quickly introduced to early music.

She then visited a cousin in Brussels and went on the Antwerp to see two seventeenth-century harpsichords. After she went on to Amsterdam. She mentions how difficult it was in New York to find printed music, so discovering a music story in Amsterdam led her to ask for various items requested by New York friends. The items they had which were unavailable in North America, she learned, had been obtained by barter--for fish.

Once back in New York, she decided to take a course in piano-tuning, and by 1950 she was ready to proffer her services--as a tuner of harpsichords.

Her first client had a Pleyel harpsichord with a broken string. She was hard-pressed to decode its unique action but eventually managed. She was confronted, one by one, with numerous other situations requiring some ingenuity to solve, since after the war parts that might be considered historically correct today were unavailable.

One job to which she was called involved an unidentified two-manual instrument that she recognized as a Ruckers. It had been decorated by Vander Meulen. When it was thereafter put up for auction, she acquired it.

In 1952 she was invited to tune for Wanda Landowska, who had been committed to recording the Well-Tempered Clavier. The player and the instrument were in Lakeville, CT, which led to Sibyl’s making many trips to Connecticut. Through this initial service she became Landowska's tuner in both New York and New Haven. Her client insisted that all the jacks be able to pluck simultaneously.

Early in 1952 Ralph Kirkpatrick ask her whether she would be interested in doing some work with the Yale instrument collection. Previously this job had fallen to the Yale music librarian, who had recently retired. Up to that point the instruments had "belonged" to the library. She was to spend a few days each month of the academic year with the collection.

She had misgivings after taking account of the early strings in the collection. Apart from plucked string keyboard instrument, the main holding were early strings. She knew little about the instruments’ care or maintenance.

She spent the following summer (1952) in Detroit in order to explore the possibility of becoming an apprentice in harpsichord-making with John Challis. She praised his skills in building study instruments capable of staying in-tune while also furnishing them with "half-hitches requiring extremely exacting tolerances."

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Although her European itinerary in 1954 included London and Brussels, she spent a good bit of time in Paris studying the available harpsichords. She also visited keyboard collections in Oxford and London.

Back in New Haven, her tuning activities continued to expand, and she found several clients on the Philadelphia Main Line.

 In 1957 Sibyl was asked by the dean whether she would consider giving up tuning to become curator of the Yale collection. It would involve moving to New Haven, he said, but the appointment would not be e well advised to take off the year 1958-59, while the paperwork was being processed.

The more dubious part of the offer was that her salary would amount to somewhat less than her tuning fees, but she was persuaded to provide a tentative assent on account of the intellectual stimulation and access to a rich library and a lively musical community.

 She devoted her year off to an itinerary that enabled her survey a number of instrument collections and meet their curators. Her first objective was Greece, but a trip full of serendipity began in London. Traveling with a friend from Philadelphia, they first went to Lugano—to see the Thyssen Collection, now in Madrid). They then hitch-hiked across Northern Italy to Venice, from whence they took a train to Athens through what was then Yugoslavia.

Returning solo to London in 1958 by way of Basel, she stopped long enough to take in interest in university library, the musical instrument collection, and the city’s wonderful concert life. The Basel collection was then run by Walter Nef, through whom she was permitted to attend the lectures of Leo Shrade. She lingered for a time but eventually found her way to the Hague, where she attended a meeting of curators of instrument collections.

She was offered a continuing appointment in Basel to the institute of musicology Shrade was trying to establish, but the pull of instruments was too strong, and she ultimately declined the Basel offer.

 She did remain in Switzerland long enough to find her way to Geneva in order to visit relatives and to meet the scholar Thomas Besterman, who was the editor of Voltaire's correspondence. (Voltaire was rumored to have had a hand in the decoration of one of the Yale instruments, and Sibyl was still reading Voltaire near the end of her life. She particularly savored his barbed turns of phrase.)

Upon her return to the U.S., Sibyl set about establishing herself in New Haven, Sibyl met with the dean who had previously explained why her salary had been set below the one previously agreed: under a new policy the number was to be reduced again, now because no staff member could be paid as much as the lowest-paid faculty member. At the time the bottom of the faculty scale was occupied by visiting professors!

He suggested, however, that she might offer to teach a course on musical instruments but he also allowed that she might wish to to earn income from outside activities. She took up the latter course with gusto—by indulging her curiosity about bond-trading the latter option and pursued with gusto by indulging an interest in bond trading. Thus the notion that trading might supplement tuning took root.

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 After considering the challenge of establishing a permanent residence in New Haven on her minimal salary and the lack of option viable career options in New Haven, Sibyl felt she had alreadty made accomplished one important goal: she had brought the collection out of mothballs and had documented the provenance of many of its holdings. The Yale Collection was now finally being moved to new premises (the Art Museum) and an exhibition catalogue being prepared. New space was being prepared for it, and she agreed to return for one year to help put it in order. She also spent all of her free time in the library of the School of Music.

Near the end of that academic year, she was invited by Doubleday to write a history of musical instruments, an offer which she declined, but she agreed instead to prepare a dictionary of them.

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At the end of 1960, Sibyl set sail for England and settled into a period of research in the British Library.