

AL 160

Interviewee: Doris Kopsky Muller

Interviewer: Paula Welch

Date: February 22, 1993

W: This interview is taking place at the home of Doris Kopsky Muller. The address is 8620-168 NW 13th Street, Gainesville, Florida, 32606. The date is Monday, February 22, 1993. My name is Paula Welch.

I would like to start out our interview today by asking you to tell me some things about your mother's background. We talked about your father before.

M: Yes. Well, my mother is your typical housewife who never worked and never went into a business of any kind.

W: What was her name?

M: This is funny [laughter]. Her name, until she died, [was the only one] we knew. As far as I knew, her name was Jeanette Balsamo, which is [of] Italian descent. And from what I can gather, she married my father when she was about twenty-two or twenty-three.

W: What was her birthdate?

M: May 5. I do not know how she got to meet him, but she met him at a six-day bicycle race.

W: Oh, my goodness.

M: Yes. She never went into business. She had just a grade school education, I imagine, because that is all they ever had in those days [before] you went to work. The only trouble was that we all thought her name was Jeanette. When she died and I went to bury her, I had a terrible time because there was no such person listed. I had to have a birth certificate for the funeral parlor or something. Her name was really Angela, and she never used Angela. I do not know where Jeanette came from, but even her mother called her Jeanette.

W: What year was she born?

M: 1900. So she was about twenty or twenty-one [when she married]. I do not know exactly, [but] I was born in 1922. She met my father at a six-day race. She used to say, "I was one of the cheerers in the gallery."

W: Did she go to the races with her family? How did she get interested?

M: She went to the races with a bunch of girls from where she worked, but all I know

is that she worked in Loft's chocolate factory, I believe, where they did something to chocolates. I do not know how chocolates are processed or how they were processed then, which would be different than now, I am sure. Anyway, she met him. She said she was introduced by someone that they all knew. They went together for about six months, and they got married. Of course my father was about thirty years older than she. I guess he must have been maybe forty-five or fifty; I do not know. If you add thirty to twenty-two, that makes him fifty-something. But I cannot picture him still racing and everything, unless I misunderstood and he was [actually] twenty years older. But there was a huge gap between them. My mother had rheumatic fever as a child, so she was never into any kind of sports. She walked, yes, but only to stores and things like that. She never did any exercises of any kind, and she thoroughly disapproved of all my training, racing, my association with boys, [and my] wearing [of] shorts. She thought that was terrible. After all, I can show you pictures of when I was sixteen. And when I had clothes on, you would think I was about eighteen or twenty because I was so big. I have always been big. I come from a long line of peasants [who were] all built like brick outhouses. So you know, you are not small at any place. I was well developed as well because the exercising, the bicycle-riding, did improve whatever physical attributes I had. She did not approve at all – I do not think she ever came to see a race.

W: What did she say when you won that national championship?

M: "It is very nice." That was it.

W: Your father was very supportive, so she just went along with him?

M: My father was the one that instigated it; my father was not supportive. I was eleven years old when he first started to take me out. He used to have a bicycle club. I guess in the beginning – I do not really even remember – but he probably said something like, "The boys are going to go out for a little Sunday ride, and I'm going to take her with me. She's got a bicycle [and he was riding a bicycle] so we are all going to go out together." I guess for a little girl, it was all right. But when I got to be twelve and thirteen and fourteen, she thought that that was horrible; she disapproved thoroughly.

W: Was it partly religious beliefs?

M: I do not know. No, I think it was just the times. I do not think that any child, after [they were] about ten or twelve years old, wore shorts. You just did not wear them.

W: I read about an ordinance that was in New York, even in the 1930s, in which they were opposing shorts.

M: That is right. When you stop and think, there was a lot of opposition. They thought it was very immoral. Of course, I used to train with boys.

W: She did not like that at all?

M: Oh, no!

W: What would she say to you?

M: Her disapproval was very easy to understand. She would just say, "I don't approve of you doing that. I don't think it's a good thing to do." When my father would say: "She's riding good. She's going to make my name famous. We're going to get a lot of free publicity. She's going to carry on her father's tradition," she just walked away from it. What happened was she had my sister five years after I was born, so she was with my sister all the time.

For instance, I used to go and ride twenty-five miles before breakfast. That meant [that] in early spring when the weather starts to change, [if] it was light enough by 6:30 or so, I would be on the road. [I would be on the road by] 6:00 when it was lighter even earlier. I did my twenty-five miles, and when I would come back, she would not want to fix breakfast for me. So my breakfast would [not] be there. I could fix it myself. Eat it or not; she did not care. She just did not approve.

W: What about your sister? Did she get into any sports?

M: No. My sister was taller than I am, but she was very fragile, like my mother. My mother's wrists were very, very small. She was very fine-boned. She did not approve.

W: What is your sister's name?

M: My sister's name was Pearl. She is deceased. You know, they say second-hand smoke does not hurt you. She never smoked a cigarette in her life, but she worked in offices where people smoked, and she died of bronchial and upper-respiratory cancer. She died about eight years ago. I had to stop and think; time goes on so quickly.

W: So she went along with your mother, then.

M: Yes. They did not go into sports at all.

W: I would like to talk now about some of the races you were in. How did you go about qualifying for the races?

M: In the beginning, especially, there were not very many races. I think the first one I ever heard [about] was the one down in Washington, DC in late October or early November, around Eclipse Park. I do not know if Eclipse Park is still there or not, but it was close to the White House. You could see the White House from there.

W: What year was this?

M: I would really have to stop and think. This was probably 1934 because I was around twelve or thirteen; maybe I was not quite thirteen. Like I said, it was down in Eclipse Park. I have things that are written in this book. It is a disgrace; I should really get together and put this silly thing together. But you know? Nobody [cares].

W: I do.

M: You do, but for the most part nobody really cares. Nobody is interested. I wear the bicycle with the little medallion charm that my son gave me when I was inducted into the hall of fame in 1992 at Sommerville, New Jersey, and my grandchildren gave me the little gold bicycle. Nobody ever asks what it is, [and] it is a very unusual-looking thing to be wearing. So it just seems very strange. Like I said, I was eleven or twelve, or something like that.

It is a sad thing that it is no longer an amateur sport. When you look at the equipment they are using and the amount of money that is spent, you know that they cannot be [amateurs]. This is the picture I was looking for. There I am back there. That was the first picture [of me] in the paper. It was 1934, 1935, or 1936; I do not know exactly.

W: You were starting to tell me about the track in Washington.

M: It really was not a track; it was a road. They blocked it off. It was a macadam road. If you fell down, well you really got your skin [torn up]. For instance one year, several years after (I do not remember exactly when), there was a spill. Come on, [if] you race, there are going to be spills. As it stands, this young man slid along the macadam road. [Actually,] it was rougher than macadam. Macadam nowadays is very smooth. That is the blacktop road. Back then, it was kind of gravelly; there were granules in it. He slid along there and tore all the skin right off his leg. Somebody put liniment on it. I do not know why they put liniment [on it], but I will never forget the sight of him going over to the Eclipse Park lake (there was a lake in there) and with his feet breaking the ice to get the icewater out to get the liniment washed off. [laughter] I do not know who suggested liniment, but they put liniment on it. All that bare skin with liniment

must have been really fiery hot. That was a race then, and I do not think there was anything again until the next year.

And you rode at state fairs and at inner-club races. This club challenged that club. If that club had a girl and you had a girl in your club, then the two girls raced. It was very informal. Even in 1937 when I won the championship, I think it was Trenton where I raced in order to qualify. You rode three or four races. There were probably five or six girls; that is all. I do not think there were more than ten or twelve [girls in bike racing] all over the country. Even two girls from Canada came down and represented Canada.

W: You said they had three or four races. Did they take the winner from each heat?

M: [If you came in first, you got five points,] if you came in second, you got three, and if you came in third, you got maybe one. Then they would have a second race. It never wound up to be a tie; I never ran into a tie all the years I was riding. It was very strange [and] very informal.

W: There is one race that I found in a *New York Times* [article] saying you [had] won the three-mile open to capture the girls' national title, defeating a field of fourteen. That was in Newark, July 26, 1937. What do you remember about that race?

M: It was just like, all right, so that one happened to be in Newark, and it was . . . I am wondering if that could have been the dirt track. It did not say. Well, it would not have [said]. All it would have said [was] "Three mile open." It does not say anything. It could have been a road race. That is a long time ago – 1937. That is over fifty years [ago]. It was not that important. My father never made it important. He never said, "That's good." He never said, "Well, you won the championship; that is wonderful." [There was] never any of that. He would say things like, "Very sloppy race. You should have done better," or "You should have watched out for so-and-so." Back then, people just did not praise their children. Parents were not demonstrative then. Fathers did not put their arms around daughters, and mothers did not kiss boys. They did not even kiss their own daughters. You might get a quick hug from your mother if she was happy about something, but there was no real physical touching back in those days. No matter what you did, your parents would always say, "You could have done better."

W: What kept you going in those races? You did not get a lot of praise, yet you had determination.

M: I had the determination because I wanted to please him; I wanted to win. I wanted to win so he would be happy with me. For years before I started to race,

I heard my father say to my mother, "If we had had a son, I could be training him for this, and he could be..." He was always sports-oriented, so I became a son. It sounds very strange. I guess it would be practically child abuse in these days, because I did not have a choice in the beginning. I do not even think I had a choice anywhere along the line. That is what I was told to do, and that is what I did.

My last race was in 1939. I was only seventeen. My mother had a fit all those years; oh, she thought it was terrible.

W: Especially as you got older?

M: Yes.

W: What about some of the other girls you met at races? Did they ever say anything about what it was like for them to race, to wear shorts, or what their parents [said]?

M: No. Most of them were like I was; they were completely controlled by their fathers. Now, there was one girl that came from New York City. I do not remember her name offhand. She had a black trainer, and my father and the black trainer knew each other. They laughed and joked and kidded about, "We're going to have match races," [for] just she and I.

W: She had a black trainer?

M: Yes. A black man was training her.

W: That is unusual.

M: I do not know where her parents were. Maybe her parents were not involved because she was a good deal older than I. When I quit racing, she was like twenty-four or twenty-five. So perhaps it had nothing to do with parental guidance at all. But mine was strictly parental.

W: So you never talked too much to the other competitors.

M: No. When you went to a hotel, nine times out of ten you roomed together. The fathers would always put two girls together to save on the expenses, because nobody paid our expenses. We did not get gas money. We did not get [cash prizes for winning]. Lots of times all you got was a ribbon or a small medal. If a race was run someplace where there was a lot of enthusiasm, they might give you a bicycle – what my father used to call a clunker, which was an ordinary bicycle that a person rode.

W: How did you travel?

M: In my father's car.

W: What kind of car was it?

M: You should have asked me that before so that I could have asked my very good friend, Bob. This shows you how little women know about cars. My father's car was a big touring car of some kind. It took three people in the front and four in the back, and he had a rack over the back of it that he made by hand. They do not even have racks like that anymore. But they hung the bikes on the back; they did not put them on the roof.

W: So you usually went with several people?

M: Yes, because my father always had clubs. He always had a club that he was training. Even if these kids were not in the races – or maybe they were – it still [helped business] because his business was the bicycle business. He was selling bicycles to the general public and bicycles that he made for the racers. There was one man that went all the time, and as the years went by, I used to say he was my stepbrother because he used to drive the car. His name was Bob Casey. My father used to say, "OK, Bob, we're going to go over to the races at so-and-so." Bob would come along, and he would drive the car. My father would sit next to him, and I was in the back seat. Maybe I was in the back seat with two other kids; sometimes I was alone. I mean, it was according to who was going and who was not.

W: Was it usually other boys that were racing, or did some of the girls go with you too?

M: There were no girls racing where I raced.

W: Oh. So you were the only one.

M: I was the only one. We would go to [places] like the state fair in Trenton, New Jersey. There might be girls coming from Somerville, there were a couple of girls from someplace else, [and] a girl came over from New York. They were from such far, distant places. It was not like now. Cars would go thirty-five miles an hour. It took two hours to go anywhere.

W: What was your hometown?

M: Well, I was born in Union City, but I grew up in Belleville. They are both in New Jersey.

W: That is the one I saw in the paper.

M: When you got ready to enter a race, and you arrived there, how did you go about warming up and getting ready for the race?

W: To begin with, my father usually did not go like [he did] before. He would go the morning of the race because he had a business he had to take care of. These races were usually on Sunday, and the business was closed on Sunday. So we would get up at five o'clock in the morning – or three o'clock – depending on how far we had to go. We would go, and according to which direction we were going, we would stop and have breakfast someplace. The funny part was, that now where they push carbohydrates as the thing to eat before the race and during the race, nobody ate carbohydrates.

W: What would be a typical breakfast?

M: A typical breakfast would be a piece of steak, and no potatoes because potatoes were fattening. A salad and a steak was what you got for breakfast. I still have the queerest eating habits. I would rather get up in the morning and eat a piece of steak or a lambchop (or something like that) freshly cooked [and] hot off the griddle than eat any kind of cereal or anything. [This] is weird, [but] that is what I was used to. We would eat very early so that we would have time to digest – according to him – before the race would go on. If the race would go on at nine o'clock in the morning you would eat at three or four in the morning so you had this span of time for the food to be digested. [That is] the way he thought.

W: If you had a race at nine o'clock, what time would you leave?

M: It was according to how far I went. If we went to Trenton which was like maybe a hundred miles away, and you figure [we traveled at] twenty-five or thirty miles an hour, it took four hours to get there.

W: So you got up real early?

M: Yes. [We got up] really early, like [at] 3:00 or 2:30. We would get in the car and I would sleep in the car; I was not doing any of the driving. My father and Bob – who drove the car almost all the time during the time I was racing – went together.

Bob was a young man who did not have a father; his father was dead. He used to come around to the place of business. My father knew his older brother, and his older brother thought this was a good thing for him to do because nobody could supervise him. There were two boys and three girls, [and] he was down at

the bottom of the list. His father was dead, and his mother worked, so he was like out on the streets. So this was fine for him to be coming to a bicycle store where there were athletic things going on.

Then you would get to wherever you were going, and you were out in a field around some road. If you were lucky, the police would close the road off. Otherwise there would be somebody standing there saying, "You cannot use this road; we are using it."

W: Did you ride a short distance before the actual race?

M: Yes. You got on your bike and rode around the road. More than anything else, [that was] to see what kind of a road it was [and] where the course was. You would ride in a bunch. Everybody would get on their bikes, not in their good jerseys, but in their training clothes. You would go around maybe a couple of times just to see what the road was like. Then you would go back and wait until it was your turn to ride. There was nothing fancy about it.

W: Where would you change clothes?

M: In the car. You would put a couple of towels over the windows and change clothes in the car. You did not have any place to change clothes. You sat down and changed your shirt. You wore the same black pants. And I wore shoes with cleats on them. I guess I grew up with cleats on my shoes; I did not know any other way. If you wanted something to drink, you usually had a choice of water, coffee, or tea that somebody carried in their vehicle. I remember my father carrying a big Thermos. I do not know why I remember it as silver-colored, but [it was] a great big silver-colored Thermos full of hot tea. He knew that coffee made me nauseous, so I had tea. It was black – no sugar. Sugar was fattening; it was no good. All of the things that they are [now] saying are wrong are what we rode on. It is a miracle we were able to do anything.

And you sat there and waited. If you were lucky and it did not rain and it was a fairly decent day, [you were] fine. If it was cold and windy, you sat in the car and waited because there was no shelter. The starter was a guy with a gun. It was not a gun like they use for starting races now that are not real guns. It would be a real gun. He would shoot a bullet in the air, and "Hurray!" – the race would start.

There was no ambulance or police protection. The trainers took care of their own people. If you fell down, they were the ones who came up and brushed you off and washed you off and put a bandage on if you needed it. And sympathy was [merely] a word in the dictionary somewhere in the Ss.

W: What did your father say about pain?

M: [There was] no pain. He was not suffering; how could I have pain?

W: What about the finish line? How would they fix up the finish line?

M: The finish line would be drawn across the road with some paint, and this was the finish line. The judges were guys sitting on cars and standing on bumpers and stuff like that to watch to see who won. It was crude.

W: You mentioned you wore the shorts and a jersey and cleats. Was there any other equipment like gloves or anything?

M: Sometimes you wore gloves; most of the times, you did not. Most of the time, you used your legs. It was a case more that everybody wore the same equipment.

W: What do you mean, "You used your legs?"

M: You backpedaled instead of pushing forward. And you cannot do that on a bike that has freewheeling. It has to be a straight thing. I do not quite know how to explain it.

I still have my bike, you know. I still have it. I was over at my son's house the other day, and I was looking at it, and I was wondering how much it would cost to get it chromed like it was before. I do not want to change anything. I guess the wheels would be too old; they are wooden wheels. They have been there for years. But that is what we rode. You rode them on the road. You did not have a steel-rimmed tire.

W: But then you had a tire that had air.

M: Yes. You had air [in] a silk tire or a heavier tire, which was some other kind of fabric.

W: You mentioned that your father was always telling you you should do better and telling you how to train and so forth. When you got in the race, how did it feel to actually be racing?

M: You know the first feeling you had? You had to go to the bathroom. That is terrible; maybe I should not have said that.

W: That is all right.

M: Anyway, you would get up to the line, and your position was [ranked] according to what time you got there and got your number. The guy who came first got number one. The guy who came tenth got number ten. You got in line, and you had a trainer to push you off (it is the same as they do now). Even the boys' races were not [of] more than maybe twenty-five or thirty [racers]. You just got out there and you started to ride. You watched. My father would say, "This is a short race. I want you to the front, I don't want you to lose that front, and I want you to go when you get to this point." While I was doing my little going around the track [before the race], he would look for where he wanted me to jump – where I had to jump forward to sprint--he knew how far I could go in the front blocking the wind.

W: What do you mean by "jump"? Go to the front, surge forward?

M: Let us put it this way. You are riding along. You are in a line, [or] maybe you are in two lines. The one in the front is breaking the wind; they are working the hardest. [My father] knew my capabilities very well. So when we were going down this road, when we would get to here I would see him waiting. He would just be standing there; he would not say [or] do anything. When I saw him, I knew that when I got to him I was going to get up on the pedals, and go forward with all of my strength. I was going to sprint. I do not know how else to explain it. That is what you did. And then [in] nine times out of ten people had different lengths of their sprints, so maybe they would not be ready to start there. He always made me sprint long so that I would be in front and be able to win. But he would stand [somewhere], and when I got to him I knew that is where I jumped. I call it "jump" because I do not know what else to say.

W: What was that feeling? Did you get a surge?

M: Oh, sure, you got a surge! I would see him there, and I would start feeling a little nervous: "Suppose someone jumps before me?" Your adrenaline is really flowing because you are getting ready to do the thing you know is going to make you win.

W: How about the newspaper coverage? Did the reporters interview you?

M: No, not usually. Usually they would come up to take pictures of the boys' races, and if they found a girl there, it was an extra bonus. They would just ask who you were, or they may ask your father. Most of the interviews were done with my father; my father was the one they would speak to. I would be standing there, and he would do the talking.

W: I noticed in some of the articles (they were pretty lengthy) he had [been the one quoted].

M: Yes. Well, they would ask a lot of questions.

W: But they would usually ask him.

M: Yes. You have to realize that this is an entirely different era. Strange men did not speak to little girls – even to interview [them]. My father was always there. Nine times out of ten, if the man said "I'd like to ask her," he would say, "Well, all right." But he would not go away.

I remember Buffalo real well. That was the first championship I won. That day, New Jersey swept the titles. Logan was the senior's [champion], Kugler was the junior's [champion], and I was the girls' [champion]. When the thing was over they had a big party, but I was still in training. I had other races to run, so I got sent to my room. I was not supposed to go out.

W: Was this at a hotel?

M: Yes. The girls were on one floor, and the boys were on the floor above. There was somebody that sat in the stairwell – I do not think there were any elevators – and waited. [There was] no intermingling. If you had to come down and go back out, you just went down. So I do not remember. I guess Kugler opened the window and hollered, "Hey Kopsky!" He was a couple of years older than I was. He was like I was; he was possessed by his father and pushed by his father. We knew each other because we had been going to races where both of us raced. He said something about, "Let's go get an ice cream sundae or a soda or just some ice cream with whipped cream on the top." We were talking about all this ice cream we were going to eat [laughter]. He took and tore the bedsheets and came down. When he got to my room, the other girl and I laughed; we thought this was hilarious. We were on the second floor, and he was on the third. This is kid stuff that is absolutely wild. So she and I waited. We tore up our sheets, [both from] her bed and my bed. We tore the sheets all up [and] tied them up in knots. He went down first, then I went down, and then she came down, and the three of us went and had strawberry ice cream.

When my father sent Bob Casey (who went with us all the time) to see if I was all right and what was happening, we were gone! He did not go to my father. He went looking for us. He went downstairs and went to the closest drugstore, [because] that is where you bought ice cream. He herded up the three of us and brought us back, and really read us the Riot Act because ice cream was absolutely forbidden. [It was] absolutely forbidden! But it was so good! I can close my eyes and still imagine how good it was. [laughter] But that is how naughty we were. I mean, that is pretty naughty.

W: What did you do with those sheets?

M: We brought them in and stuck them in the closet. We slept on the mattresses with no sheets. After we left they found the beds had no sheets on [them]. I suppose they maybe even charged my father – I do not know. But he never said anything so I do not imagine they did.

W: And he never knew about the ice cream?

M: No. Bob never told him.

W: And you never told him either – ever?

M: Why would I tell him?

W: I mean years later.

M: No! I would not even tell him years later. He would be angry because I broke my training.

He [also] never knew that we went swimming in April and May. We were not allowed to swim. Under the bicycle seat, we always carried a towel. So when it got to be the time of the year when the ice was no longer floating on the ponds, we went swimming. I had one person that I rode with. This girl that raced in Belleville with me was named Lois Alby.

W: Was she your age?

M: No. She was two years older than I because she was two grades higher up in school. We used to go where her folks had a canoe on a river. I would say to my father – especially on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon – "Dad, we are going to ride up to the lake, up to Mountain View, and we are going to go canoeing. Is that all right?" [He would say,] "Yes, but don't go in that water." [I would say,] "Oh Daddy, it's so cold. Who would go in the water?" We went in [the water and] we would be absolutely blue all over before we came out. Her folks had a little one-room cabin up there, and it was just the two of us. The canoe was there on horses outside the door, and we would go canoeing after we went swimming. But [swimming] was really forbidden.

W: How often did you do that?

M: [We did that] until my father started checking underneath the seat to see if I had a bathing suit in there. After awhile, when it got to be warm – like at the end of May and June – he would start looking: "Let's see what kind of a towel you got."

W: So that ended that.

M: That would end the swimming. But [there are] lots of times in April [when] New Jersey will have nice, sunny days. Sure the water was like ice, but what the heck, we were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen – who cared?

W: Did your friend's father encourage her like [yours did]?

M: No, her brother did. Her brother was a racer, and he encouraged her. We trained together, and we raced together in the beginning. But she got to be eighteen or nineteen, and again, it was not something that someone that age would be doing. So she gave it up. She went to work, and that was the end of it.

We walked a lot at night. Her brother would not let her date, and my father did not let me date. I had to be home at nine o'clock. [We would] walk up and down the streets of Belleville – up one street [and] down the other. It was a way to wear off some of this restless energy. We were not allowed to go to dances or anything. Did I tell you about my sock dance?

W: Yes.

M: So you know what the conditions were there. But that was for any kind of a dance. It just was not permitted.

W: You mentioned that the races were usually on Sundays.

M: Yes.

W: Did your mother ever object to you not going to church?

M: I went to church first. And if I went on the road like at three o'clock, my mother gave strict orders to my father to find a church so that I could go to church before I raced.

W: What kind of church was this?

M: [It was the] Catholic church. Bob Casey also went to the Catholic church with us.

W: So that was never a problem, then?

M: No. Well, there were not many back roads; the roads all went right to the center of the town. And the churches were right in the center of the town. So you would go by and you would see a sign that said, "Catholic church." My father

would say, "Well, you'd better go to church, [or] your mother will have a fit." So I would go to Mass.

W: Did he go?

M: No, he did not go. He did not go to church until he got to be about eighty-five. Then he figured he was liable to be getting close to heaven, and he had better mend his ways.

W: Was it a Catholic church that he also went to?

M: Yes.

W: So your whole family was generally [Catholic]?

M: Yes. My family was all Catholic. It was nice, it was different, [and] it was an experience that I am glad I had. But I missed a lot. I missed a lot because I could not do a lot of things. There are a lot of things that a girl of thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen wants to do besides race a bike. I used to go horseback riding; that was one thing he let me do. And he [also] let me play basketball in high school.

W: Was there a high school team or club?

M: Oh, no. It was in gym class [that] you played basketball. Girls did not play basketball.

W: Except in . .

M: In high school gym class; this was your gym class.

W: What was your favorite activity?

M: I really think that my favorite sport was like basketball or volleyball where I was in with a bunch of other girls. I did not spend much time with girls. I found that even later on, my interests were more sport interests than they were of other things. [This was true] even when I got to be a married person because my husband was a bicycle rider, all our friends were bicycle riders, and until we came to Florida in 1946 (we got married in 1941) all our friends were bicycle riders. I did not know any people that were not in sports.

Every store had a basement. [They] had one of these great big trap doors that you open like this, and you walk down the steps into the basement. In my father's basement, he had a rug, he had a table so you could get rubbed down –

massaged – he had a punching bag, [and] he had jump ropes to train with. Racing took care of your legs, but all of these other things were needed to strengthen the upper part of your body. I was very small. I could not even reach the bag; I used to stand on the chair so I could reach the bag to punch the bag.

W: How long would you do that?

M: Maybe ten or fifteen minutes. That is all.

W: Every day?

M: Yes, every day. When we moved to Belleville, there was not a nice cellar like that, [but] there was a back room, and that is what we did.

This is the favorite poem of the all the bicycle riders back in our time:

"December training. You can forget about your racing, go dancing now instead. Don't worry about your pacing, do your jamming on some bread. Do your sprinting for the nearest beer, for authorities have said, 'The good weather is no longer here, the racing season's dead.'"

That did not apply to me because I had to do roller racing.

W: What is roller racing?

M: You had two rollers in the back, and they were connected with chains of some kind. But they were leather chains, so I do not really know what kind they were. I was going to try to tell you. There was one roller in the front, and you set your bike up on that. Then you pushed on your little feet, and you stayed on.

W: You rode in place.

M: Yes. There was nothing to hold you; there was no one there to support you. You got up on there, you leaned on the wall until you got yourself rolling, and then you rolled. My father used to come out and see how much I was sweating as to how hard I was working because there was no [other] way of knowing.

W: Did you do this daily?

M: In the wintertime. As soon as it got too cold to go out, [you would substitute roller racing. It was] like this jamming on some bread. If you did not do jamming on your bread, you got training on your rollers.

W: So you did this at six o'clock in the morning?

M: No, I used to do it after school. I did it immediately after school and then about nine o'clock at night just before I went to bed. I would do it twice a day.

W: Approximately how long did you do it?

M: Approximately an hour or maybe an hour and a half each time. This way, you did not lose the fine edge to your racing that you had. It was dangerous; if your tire blew, you were going to get messed up.

W: Did that ever happen to you?

M: Not to me, but I saw someone else whose tire blew. They fell down, and the revolving part that they were racing on on the cylinder cut an artery in their leg, and they had to be rushed to the hospital. They wrapped towels around it. My father had lots and lots of white towels that came in a great big bag that the laundry brought. These towels were always considered very clean. This was the extent of your emergency first aid. My father wrapped it around them. I guess I must have been pretty near seventeen, because I was [already] driving. We went in his car, and I drove to the hospital because he had cut an artery, and it was pulsing. My father saw it spurting.

W: Was this in the basement of your house?

M: This was [in] the extra room he had. He had an extra room where the training was done.

W: It is not where his business was, though?

M: His business was right there.

W: So you lived in this house . . .

M: We lived above the store in the house, and his business was down below in this extra room he had. The room was divided so that one part was for repairing, and the other part was set up so that anybody who wanted to come in and train – on rollers especially – [could do so]. After awhile – I do not remember how long after – he put a speedometer of some kind in there so that he could kind of get an idea of how fast you were going. But he also had a brazing rod, and if you did not move fast enough, you got whacked with the brazing rod right across the rump of your back. [It was] because you were not working hard enough.

W: Did he do that to the other people, or just you?

M: [It was] mostly just me [laughter]. No, he did do it to a couple of the younger riders that he knew could be good if they would train a little bit harder who were kind of sloughing off.

[End of the interview]