

Dr. Radke Women's Oral History Collection

Life in the Early 1900's

By Jocelyn Peterson

September 29, 2005

Box 1 Folder 21

Oral Interview conducted by Jocelyn Peterson

Transcript copied by Alina Mower June 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

JP: I'll just do a quick intro. My name is Jocelyn Peterson and I'm interviewing Doris Olsen currently of Idaho Falls, and today's date is September twenty ninth, two thousand five.

DO: I was born the week after the United States entered World War I. And I was born in Seattle, Washington. I had a brother who was eight years older than I was. Lived in Seattle till I was about three and then we moved to Everett, Washington. Which is just a little bit north of Seattle. And lived there most of my adult life. I did have a period of twelve years when I was married and lived in Seattle, my daughter was born there and went to school there. Other than that I lived in Everett until eight years ago when I moved here. And that in itself was an experience because when you go from sea-level to mile-high it's really like you have gone to another dimension. You can fall asleep walking down the street looking in the shop windows.

JP: Your parents? Who were your parents?

DO: You mean their names?

JP: Yah, and are they from the Seattle area too?

DO: Yes, actually my mother, Margaret, was born in Everett in 1892, when Everett was just a beginning of a little town. Her father was from Norway. Her mother was from Sweden. And they met and were married, and uh, actually, I think they weren't married in Everett, they had lived in other places because my grandfather had been the mayor of a small town in the mid-west and one of her brothers was born there. And he was an entrepreneur, but in the 1890's that was...

JP: That's interesting, we just studied...I took a class from Sister Radke on the Industrial Age, right in that time period. That's great, what was his name?

DO: Peter Knudson. I'm trying to think ahead and I'm not doing a very good job. Anyway, he owned the first electric laundry in Everett which is not a term you hear very often and you don't even think of electricity in the 1890's, particularly.

JP: Do you remember hearing stories from your mother about it?

DO: Not particularly. Although, she was one of the original members and organizers of the first congregational church in Everett. There were seventeen people who met together in different people's parlors every Sunday and had church services. So I was a Congregationalist all my life until about five years ago when the little church here decided to dissolve. Okay, it's taking me a little while to organize this in my mind. Actually, my grandfather, when the gold rush hit in 98, his wife had died shortly before. She died of pneumonia when my mother was five. And they had a house-keeper. And he ran the laundry which was next door to their home, and as I say he was an entrepreneur. So when the gold rush hit, he headed north to Yukon Territory. Not to hunt for gold but to build the first hotel in Dawson City and territory. He used to stake the people who were going out to search for gold with the understanding that he would be paid back in they hit it. And he

didn't come out of it a rich man but he came out of it very comfortably. Okay, my mother was the middle child of five and the oldest boy went up and spent a year or so with their dad in Dawson while the kids lived with the house-keeper and went to school. And then the second son went up and then mother went up, and while mother was there she met my father who had come from Maryland to seek gold and didn't find gold but he found something better, my mother. And so they were married.

JP: How old was she?

DO: She was sixteen.

JP: How old was he?

DO: He was about five years older than she was. And they lived up in Dawson for several years. My brother was born there, and they came, the expression was, "they came out." When my brother was a few months old.

JP: "They came out?"

DO: That means they left the north, Alaska, and came back to The United States. But that was the expression that was always used to imply that they came back to, I don't want to say civilization because I think in Dawson it was as civilized as probably Seattle was at that time. But it was interesting because on the way out the boat one day is sailing along and someone yelled, "Look! An iceberg!" And there was a huge iceberg just off the side of the boat so everyone ran over to look at the iceberg and the boat started to tilt so the captain came tearing up and made everyone get away from the railing and spread out a little bit so the boat wouldn't capsize. And from that day on you could not get my mother on a boat. She wouldn't take the ferry across the bay to Wigby Island, she wouldn't go out and ride. No way would she get on a boat. Anyway, they came down, lived in Seattle and my father worked for the street cars. Lived in Seattle and six or seven years after they came out, I was born, in Seattle.

JP: Any brothers and sisters?

DO: Just the one brother, Melvin, who was born in Dawson.

JP: Is Melvin still alive?

DO: Melvin died when he was, he was twenty one on the eighth of December, and he died on the eighth of February. He had developed an ear infection, which developed into a mastoid, and they did a mastoid surgery, and the next day he developed an infection and it became spinal meningitis. Okay, his doctor sent to the government, or wherever you send for these things, to get permission to use a new drug that was being tested against meningitis. And it he was granted the right to use it and in the eight o'clock mail on the eighth of February, he got the package of the drug. And of course Melvin had died at three o'clock that morning. And that drug was Sulpha. Now this was in 1931, and Sulpha was just being tested. And

interesting you know, now, meningitis is not considered a life-threatening disease because they put sulpha in you and it's over. So, at that time, I was in Junior High school, I was probably a Freshman in high school. He was a sophomore at the University of Washington. Was one of those kids that everybody loved. In fact, he graduated in mid-year in January and before the school annual was published in late spring, they held a popularity contest. Who was the neatest girl and the neatest boy in high school and he won. And he had already been out of high school three months. Of course I went all the way through junior high school and high school not as an individual, but as Mel's sister. I had no identity of my own ever.

JP: Did it hit your family pretty hard when he passed away?

DO: Oh yes, you see my mother and father had divorced years before, about four years before. And I had at that time, she had remarried, and I had a step-father. But I never thought of him as a step-father, I just thought of him as my other father. And I think my brother pretty much felt the same way about it.

JP: Where did your father go? Your biological dad?

DO: He lived in Everett for some years and then he moved to Salem, Oregon, where he had family. Of course, by this time, you realize we are well into the depression, and he had worked, both my father and my step father had worked in the County Courthouse, and my dad as a clerk and my step father had help elective offices.

JP: Did they know each other?

DO: Sure, we were neighbors at one time. And then we moved away from their neighborhood when I was about three and uh mother and dad were divorced when I was maybe five, six. And mother and Adrienne were married when I was about eight. My two dads had never been close, they'd been friends, neighbors, but never really close. And neither had mother and my step-dad until many years after she and my father were divorced, and somehow their paths crossed again.

JP: Did your mother take up a job or have a career growing up?

DO: During The Depression, honey, nobody had a career and hardly anybody had a job. And after she and dad separated, she took a job as a clerk. First she worked in a millinery shop, and then she worked in what would be like the Bon Marche, or a Macy's or Dillard's, now, as a clerk for a number of years. And then after she and dad were married, she gave up her job and was just a mother and a house-wife for the rest of her life.

JP: Do you have any memories about The Depression, about living in Everett, about the community or any struggles?

DO: Everett is basically a mill town. And it was founded by the Rockefellers, and The Hills, who saw it as an excellent place to bring the railroad. The railroad runs across it still, it

runs across northern United States and into Everett. And then it goes on from Everett, north to Vancouver and south to Seattle. But it was a place because it has such excellent access to the bay to international travel, not travel.

JP: Do you remember the military base there growing up because there's a naval base there now, isn't there?

DO: Yah, but that has only been probably in the last ten years, twelve years maybe, but at that time there was a, at Wigby Island there's a naval base. A naval air base that's been there, I think it was probably there during the World War II. But I didn't live in Everett during the war, I lived in Seattle. And so I was more concerned with Boeing Field than, and those things, than what was going on in Everett. I grew up and I actually, all my life I planned to be a school teacher. My dolls could read and write before they were six years old. And it had never entered my mind that I would be anything but a school teacher. So I grew up and actually I applied to The University of Washington, I applied to Stanford, and I applied to Bellingham. And I was actually, in those days, you didn't go to Stanford just because you wanted to. You had to apply and your grades, and all of your high school records sent down. Then they either accepted you or rejected you. And they accepted me. And then I got to thinking, do I want to be that far from home? No. So I went to Bellingham. And I would have taken education which is interesting because at that time, Columbia, teachers college at Columbia was the highest rated teacher's training school in the United States, Stanford was second and Bellingham was third. And I went to Bellingham.

JP: You got good grades in high school then?

DO: uh huh.

JP: Were you focused on school or did you have a lot of extra-curricular activities?

DO: No, actually I don't remember that I did. There weren't a lot of extra-curricular activities in those days. There was, if you were in sports, there was the girls, I don't even think there was a girl's basketball team. There wasn't much of anything for girls. They were supposed to grow up and be housewives.

JP: That was promoted then?

DO: Ya, just as I say, it was partly the mindset of the world at that time. And it was partly the fact that there weren't any jobs. So a man who was supporting a family certainly had first call on a job. You wouldn't expect a woman to. And teaching was pretty much the only career, really, open, the only professional career, open to women. As a matter of fact, I'll interject one thing here that I've thought of often. My daughter wanted to be an attorney. Oh, more than anything she wanted to be an attorney. Now this was years later, and she became friends with an attorney, a woman attorney in Seattle and the woman attorney told her, "forget it, life is too short to spend it trying to make the grade as an attorney." Now see, this was twenty years, fifteen years, twenty years after.

JP: So the early seventies?

DO: No, more the middle 50's. But as I said I always wanted to be a teacher so I went to Bellingham.

JP: Did you have a lot of girl friends in high school? Did you go around and hang out?

DO: No, I had a lot of girl friends, and a few of them I have kept over all of these years, but again, during The Depression you didn't have money, period. And if you'd have money, you spent it on groceries and the things that you absolutely had to have. Now I lived a good long ways away from school, it was in town, but I'd think it was probably two miles from school. And when I went to junior high school I walked to school every day, so did everybody else. I walked home from school. When I was in high school, it was another mile, two miles to high school. I walked to high school and I walked home. In the winter time, of course over there we don't have the bad winters we have here, but if you had a dime you could take the city bus, but if you had a dime you were very sure it was really cold enough that you couldn't walk to school before you spent it because we didn't hang out anyplace because there wasn't any place to hang out. Because there weren't a lot of ice cream parlors and places you could go for a hamburger or the kind of thing that you see in every block on the main street now. There weren't such places because if anybody had money, they spent it at the grocery store. When they could, why would they spend fifteen cents for a milkshake, when for fifteen cents they could get enough milk and sugar and eggs to feed the whole family for a week.

JP: I love hearing about that too though because it's so different than what we know today.

DO: When I was in high school, I think there were two, three kids in high school who had their own car and that was it. And they didn't often drive to school because it was kind of embarrassing. Because you see I graduated from high school in the mid-thirties and it was still, remember The Depression went on until World War II. And so it was not only The Depression but it was getting worse and deeper at each year because each year there were more people losing their jobs and the few businesses that were left were going broke.

JP: Is there anything that you did growing up or that you remember that you did to compensate for the lack of money? Did you grow your own food, or did you come together in the community to help each other?

DO: I don't actually, no I don't really. I always lived in the city. We had a little vegetable garden in our backyard when I was in junior high school and high school. And of course my mother always canned and canned and canned. And we always got along okay even though there were even sometimes when I don't know where the money came from because my, I guess my dad worked at the court house, he was out of politics by then. And simply because he'd been beaten when he ran for county auditor, he'd been county auditor and he ran again and of course the feeling was very strong then against the party that was in power because they weren't getting as out of The Depression. He still worked at the court house because they needed his knowledge even though they didn't need him in the office

so he worked for the court house for years but made not a lot of money. Okay, now, when I started teaching, I taught three and half years and then married.

JP: One quick interjection, if I could, it's kind of a personal question. But when you were growing up as a girl in high school did your mom or even your step dad give you the talk about the birds and the bees? Like about sex and about (no) becoming a woman and about puberty, what was that like?

DO: I can't remember ever having a conversation about it. I think I must have had, when I started having my menstrual period, my mother and I must have had a conversation about it. Then you have to remember this, you see, in those days, before the war, it was state law that you could not be a married woman and teach school. And I don't think that was something simply held in Washington, I think it probably was in more in, more or less in. Because someone here asked me not very long ago if it had been a law in Washington, so apparently it was here, so apparently it was pretty general. And old maid school teacher was the norm, not the unusual person.

JP: Why do you think that is though, why do you think they had that law?

DO: Just stupidity. I don't really know, but I think it was really to the mentality of the time. Women didn't work. Women were housewives, and they didn't have to work. They were to stay home and take care of the children, keep the house going, and the man was the breadwinner.

JP: Do you remember, because I think of what it's like to be a woman today and we have so many conveniences, we have like all different kinds of feminine products, and you know, with pregnancy we have so many helps and comforts. But in The Depression, when you do have that mentality of women staying at home and then when there's lack of money, I mean, what do you do when you get your period in The Depression?

DO: You have old sheets, old pillowcases, old hand towels and you wash them out every night and you dry them and use them again the next day. I don't think that, uh okay, sanitary napkins, I don't know that they were even invented during The Depression. My guess would be that they came along about maybe during World War II when they realized that women, okay by then they were allowing women not only to have jobs, but women could be in the military and they certainly didn't have any time to be flushing out, washing out sanitary napkins. Okay, just the personal things, soap, you had a few kinds of soap and that was it. You had Belsnapa and you had Ivory and that was pretty much it. And you washed your clothes with Belsnapa and the dishes and you washed yourself with ivory. And you didn't in those days, people weren't concerned about their personal cleanliness as much because people didn't take a bath or a shower everyday. Very few people had, nobody had showers in their homes. You had a bath tub. And I can remember when I was a little girl, well actually, until I was, long after I was married, you didn't heat your water electrically. You built a fire in your stove and you had coils in the stove and you had a tank next to the stove and that's where the hot water heated. And taking a bath wasn't a simple thing like now. You hop out of the bed in the morning, go in and run the tub, then you really had to

kinda' put your mind to it, and it wasn't unusual when I was growing up for a family to heat water on the wood stove and then pour it into this kind of a wash tub and maybe everybody in the family, maybe just the kids, would all bath one at a time in the same water. And the joke of having a Saturday night bath wasn't a joke. Nobody, very very few people thought of having baths every couple of days, let alone having one everyday. In the first place, you wouldn't have time for anything else if you were going to heat the water.

JP: That's true. And we don't even think about those things. I mean we sit around people and if we don't constantly smell good and are clean then it's weird, but back then if someone didn't smell good it's just understood.

DO: Well yah, I can remember I probably was in high school, I could have been junior high school but it was more likely high school age when Mum was invented, it was the first women's deodorant. Because I remember then I had an aunt who had quite strong body odor and I remember my mother at a sacrifice to herself bought a jar of Mum and gave it to my aunt to try. But you know, you look back and think of the people who came West in the covered wagons and they not only wore the same clothes all the time but they had that linsey-woolsey and, which was linen and wool. And so they couldn't have washed theirs if they wanted to. And they'd wear those same, but I guess if you all smelled, you're not aware of it.

JP: And then when you, after high school, you applied for Bellingham, Stanford and University of Washington?

DO: Actually, the University at that time, well I wasn't very serious about the university because if you wanted to teach at elementary school it was Bellingham, Cheney and I know the other third one but I can't think of it, you went to one of them, the normal schools to teach elementary, and to teach high school you went to the University of Washington. I don't think, you couldn't, they were very specialized. If you wanted education, you went to the University of Washington, if you wanted for instance pharmacy, you went to Pullman. And of course, as I started to say, I was going to be a school teacher. Well if I was going to be a school teacher, I was never going to get married and you've got to also remember in the 1930's you didn't have promiscuous sex. You didn't, I can remember one girl in high school who died because she had a botched abortion. And if you got pregnant, you had the baby and your family sort of whisked you away and you stayed with an aunt who lived in Oregon or Wisconsin or something so nobody knew you were pregnant because it was a fate worse than death.

JP: Why?

DO: Because you didn't have sex before marriage.

JP: It was unheard of?

DO: No, it wasn't unheard of but it was unaccepted, let's put it that way. You didn't, nobody was ever promiscuous and even if you thought you were in love in high school that's alright, there's certain far you go but that's it and no farther.

JP: Do you remember your parents continuing that? Do you remember what they told you about abortion?

DO: There wasn't such a thing, I mean no.

JP: What happened when you heard about the girl in high school? That had gotten an abortion?

DO: Everybody's heart was broken. To think she could, it was interesting because the fellow by whom she became pregnant went on to become a bible-totin' minister who was against birth control and against abortion and against everything. I hope God strikes him dead someday. Anyway, that's besides the point. But as I say, I was going to be an old maid school teacher all my life, I didn't need to know. So when my mother tried to tell me anything about sex and stuff I'd have just blocked her out.

JP: Do you remember, we just got done studying abortion in this class that we are taking. Do you remember anything about the story about the young girl? About where she went or what her experience was like or were there rumors going around school about it?

DO: Pretty much because everybody felt, I don't think it was general knowledge that it happened. But she went, in those days if you had an abortion you went to some little, you didn't go to a doctor because the doctor didn't do it. But there'd be some lady that lived up in the back alley some place and you'd go to her and she would do whatever means they had to start you bleeding and you either got blood poisoning and died or you came out of it okay and very often you didn't even have a child because it was just something that somebody had figured out and you went to them and you didn't tell anybody where you'd gone because if you had, why, she would be arrested and so it was just something that was whispered about and if you needed an abortion and you heard of somebody who did it, you were lucky. But if a girl became pregnant, as I say her family would whisk her away some place and then when the baby was born it was given to an orphanage.

JP: Were they encouraged to marry? Like if a couple, if the girl did get pregnant, was she encouraged to marry the guy?

DO: No, because as I say it was not, now growing up I knew one person who had that problem, which meant that I probably knew only one person who had ever had sex before they were married. Because it just wasn't done. And if it did then you, yah, if you had sex you didn't tell anybody about it because it was not something that was socially acceptable.

JP: So then you decided to go to school.

DO: I went to school, I went to the four quarters because you went autumn, winter, spring and then summer quarter was the quarter that the teachers came back to go to school. Okay, in

those days, until the middle 1930's you could get a life certificate if you had gone to college two years, and then had taught, I think it was five. But just about the time I started teacher's college was when they cancelled out life certificates, so you had, my class was the first class that had to go to school, college, three years and which would be the equivalent of nine quarters. And then you got a provisional certificate and within the next five years you had to teach three of those five years and you had to go back summers and make up the fourth year. And then you got your Bachelor's degree in education and you got a certificate that was, I can't remember, it wasn't the equivalent of a life-certificate, I think it was good for six years, and in those six years, you had to go back and renew it. Because by the time I was through teaching and getting married, it was getting to be the time that the first people with those certificates, their five or six year certificate was expiring and they hadn't been going back and doing their thing, and there was a great to do about it. But of course I quit teaching and it didn't matter I had gotten married.

JP: Tell me about that. Tell me about school and then you can work your way into how you met your husband.

DO: I went four quarters straight through because you didn't get a job working at the dime store or wherever people worked during the summer because they wouldn't hire college kids when there were men with families who needed a job. So there was no point in getting, in staying, just sitting home for three months.

JP: When you went job searching, did employers just look at your situation and sometimes they'd just let you go because they had another applicant or maybe that had a family. If a young college student is looking for a job, they might get fired because there's a person who needs the job more, who has a family.

DO: Yes, because wages were low anyway. So I finished at Christmas time and I'll always think that I got a job simply because my father must have had some standing in the community and knew the right people and in his job in the court house had been able to do some things for the superintendent of schools that needed to be done and nobody had time for. But I got my job because this first grade teacher had gotten married. She hadn't told anybody she had gotten married because she'd have lost her job. So she got married, well that wasn't bad enough but the poor soul got pregnant. You can imagine, well these were the days when you got married, you expected to be pregnant. I think that's probably why they didn't hire because about that time I think probably the Trojans, you know, for men, had come on the market. They weren't out on the shelf, (no?) oh heavens no, if a man wanted one, he had to go in and he had to ask the clerk and then the clerk would look under the desk, or under the counter, or maybe them kept them in the safe, I mean you didn't just go in and buy one. I think a man literally went in and bartered his soul to the devil to get one. Of course for women there was nothing. There was no diaphragms, there was nothing a woman could do, anytime she had sex had a fifty/fifty chance of coming out pregnant.

JP: Do you remember any education that you got, or do you remember anyone talking to you about birth control? When you were young?

DO: I'm telling you, there wasn't any such thing as birth control. When I went to college there was no such thing as birth control. I don't know when birth control came on the market, yah I do, it was about the time I got married because my mother gave me something she had heard was. So I was married for two months before I became pregnant, so it obviously wasn't all that effective.

JP: Your mother wanted you to wait though? (yah) Before having children? Why?

DO: Well so that at least I had time to adjust to being married and keeping house before I became pregnant and it was probably too bad because I was sick eight of the nine months, I had morning sickness. Which isn't the way it's supposed to be. I gained less than twenty pounds in the nine months I was pregnant. It wasn't an easy thing. Anyway.

JP: You were a teacher, you were taking four quarters.

DO: Yah, I got this job teaching at first a combination first and second. In those days school started in September and you had the first A and then in February they went to be the first B because we had a new class entering at the end of January, first of February. So I had a combination, second half of the first grade, first half of the second grade group. Bellingham, part of the reason why it was considered one of the best schools