Oral History Number: 262-007
Interviewee: Madonna Smith
Interviewer: Eloise Sagmiller
Date of Interview: April 23, 1991
Project: Montana Women Pilots Oral History Collection

Eloise Sagmiller: OK, Madonna, would you tell me your name, where you were born, how long you lived in Montana—are you a native Montanan?

Madonna Smith: Pretty much so. I was born in Montana. My name is Madonna Smith. My maiden name was Dernbach and I was born around Lewistown on a farm, a ranch, and then we lived in Illinois until I was in the fourth grade. I was born here because my parents were here visiting at that time. So we came back when I was in the fourth grade, and I and my family moved to a ranch outside of Lewistown here, three and a half miles, and we didn’t live there too long. We ranched for a short time and the place was rented, and then it was sold so we had to move to town. I’ve been here ever since. I took nurse’s training right here in Lewistown and graduated. And I worked in the local hospital and got married here, and I have been in public health nursing for 21 years. So I’ve pretty much been a local person I’d say most all of my life.

ES: So the gal who’s doing the taping of all the public health nurses didn’t get you?

MS: No.

ES: Well you’re a double goodie for me, then. [Laughter]

MS: Yes, I guess so, because I hadn’t heard about it before you contacted me.

ES: Yeah, that was another ongoing...

MS: Another area.

ES: Yeah, uh huh. And retired teachers. I’ve been picking up retired teachers as I go [inaudible] so it’s been fun.

MS: Well we just finished having our public health nurse convention over in Helena. I really didn’t realize I was such a relic until I got over there with those younger girls and started telling them about how things were when I first started in public health. It’s been a long time.

ES: [inaudible] you never really realize it. Well now tell me about what led you into flying. How did you get interested in it?

MS: Well, I would say it definitely was my husband. I think he dreamt of flying forever and it wasn’t until he was married and had three children that he decided he could maybe afford to
and so he went into it. And I tell you what, it was about the closest thing to a divorce we could have come. [Laughter] Finally, one day I decided if it was going to have to go on this way, I was going to fly also. I couldn’t see flying and taking, as far as I was concerned, all of these chances with the family and not being able to do it myself. So I was only going to just take as many lessons as I would have to take to be able to land the plane if it was necessary. Well, of course, by the time you can do that you practically have your license—you might as well get it. So that’s what really led me into it. I told him, “First of all, you’re going to get your license and then you’re going to want an airplane.” And I don’t think he even had his license before he was driving up there showing me this airplane. [Laughter] So it was quite an experience. He took his lessons and got his license in a real short time. I think it was mainly so he could show us how nice it was to be able to go different places in such a short time and have so much fun with it, which we later did. I did come to realize that it was a lot of fun.

ES: I notice that everywhere is a long way from here. [Laughter]

MS: That is real true, and we could go to Billings in 30 minutes and go to Bozeman in just a short time, and especially any place that’s over the mountains you can get in so much less time. And he’s in an electrical business, and he used it a fair amount for that too. He had jobs in Bozeman and Hot Springs, Montana, which is over I think between Missoula and Kalispell. And a lot of different places he was able to use that for that. He had his license—and I’m not sure how long after that it was that I started to fly—but it just so happened that this class, I think, was one of the first ground school classes that had women in it, and there were five of us. So the guys thought they had never had it so well, so good, and we took turns and each one of us would bring cookies and they’d never had cookies before and of course there were three doctors’ wives and they all outdid each other and then we all realized that we were in competition, so we really had some goodies for all of the ground school classes. It was a lot of fun, because there were so many of the girls taking lessons at the same time.

ES: Are they still in this area, or have they...

MS: Only one is gone, and she has since been killed in a car accident. The rest of them are still here.

ES: When you finally bought a plane, what kind did you get?

MS: We got a Piper Tri-Pacer. I guess they’re not supposed to be the easiest thing to land, but if you start with it and don’t know any different, I never did know that it was that difficult, actually. We just had a lot of fun in it, and it wasn’t too long after...Well, when I was taking my ground school, I was pregnant. During all this trial time, I ended up getting pregnant, so when I went to take my test, I was big and pregnant. Believe me, I think he was born probably four days after I took the test. I could hardly sit and so forth. But I had to laugh because I asked the fellow that was giving the test, I said, “Do you mind if I get up and walk around? I can’t sit any longer.” It was four hours. And he said, “Well, I’ve never had anyone in my class before that
was in your shape. Maybe you’d just better get up and walk around.” [Laughter] And then it was after he was born, not too long after, that I joined the 99s. And of course all the girls here had joined or were joining about the same time, so we would trade off whenever we went to out of town meetings.

ES: Was there someone who came through and organized the club?

MS: I think that we inquired. We got a hold of somebody from the 99s, and then when she realized there were that many of us here, it was pretty good bait, so we all kind of joined together. We had a lot of fun with that. There were two...They called them races, but actually it was more or less contests, and Flo Majerus—you interviewed her yesterday or a couple days ago—she was my co-pilot one time, and then another gal that her husband flew with was my co-pilot another time. It was a lot of fun because we had to find ground points of interest and we didn’t know where we were going when we started or when we got to our destination we didn’t know which route they were going to take us on the way home. They would just give us little rhyming things to figure out and you’d find out as you went along.

ES: Did the race, so-called, take you out of the state, or was it all...

MS: One of them went to Idaho. We were in—do you remember?—Pocatello and landed in two Idaho towns. I can’t remember where else. And then there was a lot of places in Montana. The one in-state, the destination was Glasgow, and then on the way back we landed in Roundup and then came on home. So it was a lot of fun. We stayed overnight each time. There was dark contests and just about anything you could...

ES: How many women do you think belonged about that time from Montana?

MS: Oh boy, that’s a question I don’t think I can even begin to answer. We would go for a luncheon, a brunch meeting, once a month, and I would say there would probably be around 20 girls each time at the meeting, but I’m sure there were twice that many that belonged.

ES: Would you all fly in to one meeting?

MS: We’d all fly in to one meeting place and we’d have our meeting and have our brunch and then go back home again.

ES: That sounds like fun.

MS: It was a lot of fun.

ES: I could get into that. [Laughter]

MS: It was really a lot of fun.
ES: That’s neat.

MS: And then, actually, with the family, we belonged to the local hangar association and we used to have fly-ins just right close around here different times and the whole club would fly into Denton and different areas for a breakfast. And we’d take our families, and that was good. That was fun. So we really did enjoy it while we were doing it. But it seemed like all of a sudden we realized that we weren’t flying as much as we really should to warrant keeping the plane, and then we had a chance to sell it and I don’t think I’ve been up but about twice since. Not too much. After you get rid of your plane, it seems like you’re kind of...You just don’t go and rent one.

ES: And then you have to keep your license up, I suppose.

MS: Well, yeah. All I’d have to do is landings and take-offs to be qualified, but I’d want to go back for some check-out time.

ES: Did you have just a straight pilot’s license, or did you get another rating like instrument rating?

MS: I didn’t ever. I was pretty busy. I had four kids.

ES: Well, so you can date when you got your license about the time of the birth of your son, so what year was that?

MS: That was 1965. That’s right when I got my license.

ES: I was interested in how many women...I’m trying to figure out how many women belonged to the 99s. Evidently, it’s an ongoing club that’s still in existence somewhere.

MS: It is, uh huh. Would you have interviewed Dotty Payne from Great Falls, by chance?

ES: No, I haven’t.

MS: OK, she was an officer and she just might...She would be one that would know more about that.

ES: P-A-Y-N-E?

MS: Right.

ES: Payne, OK.
MS: I just don’t even know if I...I probably did know, but I just can’t remember how many there were at all. The national organization is the one that has the cross-country powder puffs. I’m not sure if they still have that or not, but they’ve had it up until not too long ago, anyway.

ES: So the 99 in Montana, you belonged to the state organization but not the national, is that right?

MS: I think when we paid dues to the state organization, a part of our dues went into the national and we were automatically members.

ES: Oh I see, so if you really wanted to do the cross-country...

MS: Oh, yes.

ES: Well have you used the flying in your work?

MS: I took one trip after I got this job over to Helena, and I remember my supervisor was always real excited because she just thought we were going to fly everywhere when I came to work. But it is surprising—it seems like we tried for about three times before we ever really got weather that was going to be good enough for us to go and come back the next day. And I’m not one for flying in the clouds. I know on one of my cross-countries when I was a student, I took off to go to Billings and my instructor said, “You know, they’re expecting snow flurries this afternoon. What are you going to do if it starts to snow when you’re in Billings?” And I said, “I’ll just stay overnight. I have relatives there.” He said, “Good, because it just might.” Well I took off and I got over the east end of the Snowies and it looked worse and worse as I was going and finally I heard a pilot report and he was around Roundup and he said the clouds were on the ground there. So I just made a 180 and came back. And when I turned to come back, I realized that behind me the clouds were real low too, so I had to drop down in elevation and then I thought oh boy, there’s the highway. I can just follow the highway right on into Lewistown. And so I got piking (?) down the highway and all of a sudden I noticed that I was going straight north, so was on the highway to Malta instead of into Lewistown. I had spotted Grass Range, but I was just taking the wrong highway. So I turned around and came back and went the other way. So when I got home, I said to Bud, my husband, I said, “Well, were you worried about me?” And he said, “No, I knew if there was a cloud in the sky you would come home.” [Laughter]

ES: Doesn’t it make you wish they had “87” printed on the road? [Laughter]

MS: Right. Is that sun bothering you?

ES: No, it’ll drop in a minute.
MS: I think it was one time we went to a meeting up in Fort Hind (?), Montana, that Bud went with me and I don’t remember who else was with me. But he used to kind of like to sneak in the plane behind and go golfing at different places where our meetings might be where he hadn’t golfed before.

ES: Great combination. [Laughter] Now that’s something you could do now. You could [inaudible]

MS: That’s right, we could.

ES: Well I assume that you landed over in the Poison Airport, then [inaudible] over in that area. We’ve got a longer strip now over in Ronan [inaudible]

MS: Yeah, you know, as much more traffic as there is now, I don’t know that I’d ever...I don’t have the desire to. I don’t know, I guess I’ve done it and I just felt like it was important for me to have done it then but anymore I just feel like I’m not...You know, I just don’t have the desire to do it again.

ES: How about your kids? Do they like to fly?

MS: Oh, my son, I’m sure, would love too, and the other ones haven’t ever said too much about it. The others are girls. But he would love to. It is a lot more expensive now, and I don’t know, percentage-wise, how much more expensive it would be now than then. But I remember I thought it was an arm and a leg then, and I’m sure it is now.

ES: I’ve heard a lot of people say it’s very expensive. I have no idea what it costs.

MS: The gasoline is so much more expensive and everything would be. We bought our Tri-Pacer. I don’t remember what year it was or how old it was, but it was in very good condition. When I first saw it, it was in a million pieces on the floor of the hangar at the airport and they were doing what they call the annual overhaul. And so I just thought we were buying this piece of junk to fly across the country in. Anyway, it cost us $4,000—was that right, Bud? $3,800. And we bought it in with another party, and he was a local plumber at the time, and I tell you, as far as he was concerned, he was the local drunk. He had absolutely no qualms about doing anything drunk. All I could see is him crashing in this airplane and suing us, or his wife suing us, for everything we had. But he didn’t fly it very much. He got into some trouble one time right shortly after he flew and he couldn’t...I don’t know, couldn’t...I don’t remember what he couldn’t do, but he got up there and he immediately decided to turn back and land. He was talking into the wrong side of the mike, first of all, and the radio operator said to him, “I can’t understand you and I can’t hear you. Are you sure you’re talking into the right side of the mike?” The guy said, “I’ll be damned if I’m not.” Talking into the wrong side of the mike. Then he said, “Clear the airport, I’m coming in. I’m having trouble.” So he landed and that was the last time he ever flew. So then we bought his half out. We hadn’t had it long enough, so we felt
like we could afford to buy his half. So then we had it by ourselves from then on. And I think we sold it for as much as we paid for it. Same price.

**ES:** Is that right? Good investment.

**MS:** And how long did we have it?

**Bud MS:** [inaudible]

**MS:** Is that all? I thought it was a lot longer than that. They’re expensive if you don’t fly them, because you have to have an annual, and that’s expensive, and then if you have fabric covering, that has to be updated every so often and you have to almost keep them under cover, and that’s expensive. So if you don’t use them, they’re, I would say, too much to be able to have them sitting around. It’s much more feasible just to rent. I know if we would have just rented a plane for the amount of hours that we put in the last year, I’m sure we could have come out a lot cheaper than what it was to have had the plane.

**ES:** Did you tell me the name of your instructor?

**MS:** Well I started out with Murray Duffy (?) and—or, no I didn’t either—I started out with Bob Simpson and then I ended up with Murray Duffy (?), so I took some from each one. They were direct opposites. Bob was, I think he was so meticulous that I had been flying for like ten hours and I didn’t feel like I was any closer to soloing than I was my first hour, and I think Bud had soloed in five hours, so of course I was comparing myself to him. Then when I got going with Murray, he soloed me the first time we went up. He just said, “Do you feel like you’re ready?” And I said, “Do you feel like I am?” He said, “It doesn’t make any difference what I feel. It’s what you feel. I’m perfectly confident, but you’ve got to feel like you can.”

The next time around, he just said, “I’m going to get out and you go ahead. I’ll be standing by the runway, and if you see me waving my hands, that means land. Make three touch and goes.” On my third one, I thought, “Oh my Lord, I forgot to look at him and see if he was waving his hands.” I was so intent on what I was doing otherwise, I never even looked at him. [Laughter] He said I wasn’t in trouble, so. But I will admit, I think it made me a lot more conscious of direction, of where the mountain areas were, and a lot of things like that I don’t think women, as a whole, pay much attention to. I mean, even now, I’ll say, “Is it at the west end of town or the east end?” Most girls will say, “Well, I don’t have any idea which end of town is which.” They don’t pay too much attention to direction, where I think after you’ve flown for a while you do more.

**ES:** What’s the farthest you ever flew?

**MS:** I flew, because I combined my nursing and it wasn’t that I was the pilot but I went with the pilot and we took a man that had had a heart attack here while he was hunting back to
Minnesota and he let me fly some, the pilot. And then we went back to Wisconsin to a brother’s graduation from medical school, to Milwaukee. The rest of it I think was probably just in Montana. Oh, we went to California once, to Bakersfield.

ES: Oh, that’s a long way.

MS: Yeah.

ES: Did you ever consider Life Flight, the helicopter flying?

MS: I did, but I think by the time I thought about it I was too far down the line with my nursing for that. Basically, I think it would have interfered with my family quite a bit, and you’re on call a lot. It was enough for me to be away when we flew off some place to have our lunches with the 99s. Once a month, it seemed like it came around awful fast when you have a baby.

ES: Oh, yeah. Did you take the baby with you?

MS: No, I didn’t. My mother was in town and so she helped some. I think our meetings almost always were on Saturdays and Bud, he opted to babysit so I could go.

ES: That’s pretty nice. [Laughter]

MS: Yeah, in fact I remember taking off one time when the doctor was just coming because one of the kids were sick. I had called him and I told him I was leaving and he was also a pilot, so he thought I should be on my way and not worry about it, that between he and Bud they could take care of the sick child. So I went ahead and I went and felt confident the child was being taken care of. Actually, youngest one, which was the one that was born right at the time I took my written test, after I came home from the hospital, between the doctor and my husband, they barely dropped me off and they took off like the next day for Washington, D.C. The doctor was the president of the American Medical Association and he had to go to the meetings and he wanted another pilot to fly with him. So they both talked about it. At the time of the birth, I can remember them talking. They were standing over my bed talking about going back east on this plane trip, and so he had some help. He also flew. So I was left with the new baby and my husband took off with the doctor.

ES: On a really neat trip.

MS: Right, it really was. It was really a neat trip. I can’t think of any other highlights, can you, Bud?

ES: [inaudible]
MS: We went to Helena one time for a brother’s graduation from college and I think some of us had to go later so we flew over and my mother was over there and she wasn’t feeling real well, so I decided that I would fly her home in the plane. But the weather wasn’t real good, and so what the latest decision was is that we would fly and if it wasn’t good, I’d land in Great Falls and they would pick us up with the car and we’d leave the plane there. I got into Great Falls. I radioed and asked them what the weather was and what they thought about me going on to Lewistown. He kept saying, “How much time do you have?” and I thought I meant how much gasoline time do I have. And I told him, “I’ve got plenty of time.” “Well how much?” “I’ve got enough to go and come back ten times over.” I think I told him then how much and finally got it straightened out—how many hours of flying time I had. So then we ended up landing there and it was all socked in, so we waited and they came and picked us up. By that time my mother was feeling better. But she enjoyed it. I flew her several times.

One trip we came back from Billings after we had delivered my niece down there. She had come and stayed with us for a visit and then I took her back and brought my mother back from Billings. I can remember, I got carburetor ice over the mountains and so I pulled my carburetor heat on, which really makes the engine sound like it’s going to quit. And of course we all knew better than to push it back in again, so I just left it on and I thought to myself, “Oh boy, here’s my mother. She’s going to be panicked and here we are having carburetor ice.” And I was looking for a road, real fast. She never got the least bit worried. And then as we were coming into Lewistown, the wind was just terrible and it was pretty much a crosswind for the runway. So I told her, I said, “Mom, it’s going to be really, really rough. Maybe you should get the carton out of the back in case you might get sick.” “Well I’m not going to get sick,” she said. Of course we knew everybody that was at the flight service station up here, locally, we were good friends with, so it was just like having an extra hand up there. And he kept telling me it was really going to be pretty much crosswind to the runway, so I was ready for it and we came in. He said, “You know, why don’t you just take a trial fly-by and get a feel of it.” I came on in and decided it was OK and I landed. Boy my mother was just as confident as she could be and I said, after we got out, “Didn’t you even get the least bit scared?” and I told her what happened with the carburetor ice. She said, “Yeah, I knew something didn’t sound quite right, but I saw you were doing something down there with the controls and I just thought to myself, ‘If she can fly with their four kids, I guess I need not worry.’” [Laughter]

ES: [inaudible]

MS: That’s right, she had all the faith in the world, as if I knew what I was doing. I think I’ve probably taken all the time I need to take with you.

ES: Oh gosh, no. I was going to ask you—have you ever flown any other planes other than the Tri-Pacer?

MS: We flew a Moody, but I don’t think I ever actually got checked out in the Moody. So that was basically what...And then I did a lot of flying with the other girls because we would kind of
plane pool as we went to the other places. Actually, the one that was in the other seat a lot of times did radioing because of the...Actually, even then, there would be a lot of traffic, air traffic. I can remember we went with one of the girls one time and she had a Twin and they had made a circle about three times and finally...At that particular time, Flo Majerus was doing the radioing and she knew how to do radioing with all her experience, and she just said, you know, she identified herself and she said, “We’re coming in for a landing. We’re down on our gasoline and we need to land.” And Joan Orley (?), flying the plane, she landed and they respected what she had to say and let us come in, cleared us. But I didn’t get a lot of time in any other plane.

**ES:** I just wondered how you would contrast how they feel to fly. I mean, if you were going to go get another one, would you go back to the same Tri-Pacer or would you go for a different one?

**MS:** Well, the Tri-pacer is a high-wing and probably what’s ideal would be a low-wing. They handle easier in the wind and easier to land, and that would be just an easier plane to fly.

**ES:** I think Flo said that too, that the low-wing is better in the wind.

**MS:** Much more stable. So I guess I figured that it’s kind of like learning how to drive in a stick shift or an automatic as a difference between a high-wing and a low-wing. I guess that would be the way I would explain that, just a lot of people feel that they are harder to fly.

[End of Interview]