Hannah Soukup: Today is January 27, 2016, and I am Hannah Soukup and I’m interviewing Lillian McCammon. She is University of Montana alum and former Aquamaid, and the Aquamaids were the University’s synchronized swimming team.

Lillian McCammon: I was born in Orange County, New York, in the village of Walden. Only lived there about five years. I think my dad lost his job, [Great] Depression. We moved to a dairy farming community where I spent grades one through six in little Johnson, New York.

HS: What year were you born?

LM: Nineteen twenty-nine.

HS: Okay, so right at the beginning of the Depression.

LM: Yes.

LM: My dad started his own business. My mother had a little store and soda fountain, and my brother and I made some delicious ice cream treats. (laughs) That was fun.

HS: Did you help her out at the soda fountain?

LM: Actually, my brother and I did the soda fountain because we got really good at making sodas and banana splits and all of that. My mother did the store, and I was not very good over there at all.

HS: Was it sort of a drug store?

LM: No, it was a little grocery store. I know she sold bread and milk, a little candy. Just little items that people who didn’t want to go the 30 miles or so to Middletown to shop, they could get by with what my mother had.

HS: So you were on the University’s synchronized swimming team?

LM: Yes.
HS: So did you start swimming at an early age?

LM: I started swimming at six in Johnson at the swimming hole. All of the kids there gathered up, walked up the tracks. Those that could swim swung off a tube from an old maple tree. Those that couldn’t were down in the muddy part of that stream with all of those awful clinging blood suckers. So I watched and watched and watched, and finally I decided, “I’m going to do it.” I did. I swung over the water, I dropped, and I dog paddled hard. I wasn’t sure I could make the shallow part, but I did and after that I’ve been swimming ever since.

HS: (laughs) Well, that’s wonderful. So did you swim on a team while you were in school—high school?

LM: There was nothing...No, my high school was in Warwick, New York. My dad’s business had expanded and we moved there, and I spent seventh through twelfth grade at Warwick High School. We were close to Greenwood Lake also, and there was a nice beach there for swimming. Then there was a crik, creek, whatever, flowing through Warwick, so a bunch of us there would go swimming, again, in the creek. All summer long we were swimming. (laughs)

HS: So you were self-taught?

LM: Yes, dog paddle mostly.

HS: Then after you finished high school in Warwick, you came to the University of Montana.

LM: Not exactly.

HS: Okay, well, tell me about that.

LM: All right, my dad had asthma and the farmers—Orange County are very much dairy farming there—would bring him those big milk cans that were leaking. He’d go to work early and take care of those by soldering them with lead.

HS: Oh my goodness.

LM: Yes, and his asthma got so bad, and none of us...I couldn’t go any place. I had a job or two, and my dad died 13th of August, 1948. After that, the postmaster in Warwick asked if I would like to work there because he knew the situation. So I went to work for the post office, six in the morning helping sort the mail when it came in until after six at night when the windows closed. But in the afternoon I had off, and I took my mother’s car and drove to Greenwood Lake and went swimming off what we called “The Rock”. Actually, whenever I could I was in water.
Then a friend of mine, high school friend Dixie, was attending Stanford University. She was going...I think this would be her junior year. She was on the polo team. Dixie loved horses. She wanted to visit her grandmother in Corinth, Mississippi, and her folks would let her go if she had someone to go with her on the way back. So Mr. Carr the postmaster let me go. We rode the bus all the way from Warwick—first the Warwick stage lines then Greyhound—by way of Corinth, Mississippi, to California. After I crossed that Mississippi River, dry climate! I can remember in Warwick we had an apartment on Main Street. It was so hot I would take my pillow and go out on the fire escape to sleep. So hot and humid. The humidity was terrific, but the west was dry. I loved it! I loved everything about it. When I got back home...I had helped Dixie cheer at a Stanford game. We were part of a card section. I don’t know whether they have that any more or not, but you form words in one section of the stands.

HS: Okay, yes. Like a cheer?

LM: Oh yes, yes. So we just held up words. We made words. After that I decided, I’m going to college, and I’m going to college west of the Mississippi. (laughs) So I started getting catalogs. Three schools came within my budget. I had 5,000 by then saved, and one was Oklahoma, one was Oregon and one was Montana—Missoula. There was a full page in the catalog from Missoula on synchronized swimming.

HS: Really?

LM: Yes.

HS: I’ll have to look at that.

LM: I don’t know if there’s a catalog that would be pre-’51 because I was sending from ’49, ’50 and that area. And came out. They accepted me. Yes, I bused out—that’s what I could afford. I mean I was pinching pennies.

Another thing that helped here in Missoula, I think there was a 300 dollar fee at that time per quarter. Maybe my memory doesn’t serve me just right. But on top of that was a 25 dollar out of state fee, which I had to pay first quarter. After first quarter, my grades were such, if you kept your grades at a certain level, no out of state fee, because they gave you 25 dollars.

HS: Oh wow, for having good grades?

LM: Yes.

HS: That was wonderful.

LM: I thought so too, so that’s how I got here.

HS: What did your mom think about you leaving and coming all the way out here?
LM: I think it was very hard on her because we did so much together. We would go to the local high school games. I’m a clarinet player and played in the concert band, the Warwick concert band. We’d go to West Point, and for the concerts that they had there. West Point was on the other side of the county on the Hudson River. We were near New Jersey, just a mile off the Jersey line. So, yes, I think my mother missed me, and I think she would have liked me to stay home and marry a local boy because she pointed some out. (laughs) But after I’d been with Dixie all the way to Stanford, no way. I wanted to see the West. I’m still here.

HS: Wow. It’s funny how you go to a geographic location, and it just speaks to you and you decide that’s where I have to be.

LM: That’s correct, very much.

HS: So you loved school, and you were a clarinet player, and you were a swimmer. (laughs)

LM: Yes, yes. I’ll tell you one other thing about high school. My senior year, January, they told me I was salutatorian. I knew that meant a speech. I’m not very good at speaking, especially in front of someone, even Hannah. (laughs) But from then on I said to myself, “My grades are going to be pretty low from now on.” Then I was told, “Didn’t matter. They’re only using the grades up through the first semester.” So it didn’t matter what I’d do. My dad had a customer—he put in some heating, plumbing or something up at Bellvale. This lady...and we were so close to New York, we had a lot of commuters. The fellow that had our Warwick concert band also had the New York City Ballet Orchestra. So this lady in Bellvale was a star on Broadway, and I wish I could remember her name. We went up there for dinner. She wanted to show appreciation to my dad for his work. Somehow it was mentioned that I had to make a welcoming speech at graduation, and I said, “I can’t do it.”

She got up, and she said, “Yes, you can. You just stand up, open up your arms and say, ‘Welcome.’” That’s what she did. (laughs) I could no more see myself doing that...that was the end of her speech.

HS: Just one word.

LM: All I was to say was “Welcome!” Funny the things you remember that you just die for. As a cheerleader, I know, my brother always played on the first team in basketball. Well the coach changed from my brother to Charlie O’Dell, and I always had my brother’s name to cheer for. We were in a V. I was at the peak, and who is taking my brother’s place? I could not think of it. Finally someone yelled out Charlie O’Dell, so I said, “Yay Charlie O’Dell!” After we finished that cheer, I sat down and cried. I was just floored. I’m not good in front of any audience, crowd, or anything. I just die.
HS: How was your speech then? How did it go?

LM: I don’t think it was the best, and I’ll tell you why. Next year, Warwick High School added to all of its classes, a class in speech. That’s true. That really happened.

HS: Maybe they felt bad that they hadn’t prepared you for getting up and having to talk to a large room full of people.

LM: I think that they called that lady on stage up in Bellvale...they called her mother Eckhart, come to think of it. I don’t know what her stage name was. I was not going to do what she suggested.

HS: So you made it from Warwick, out to Missoula, and what year was that?

LM: That was the fall of 1951. I could vote. I was then 21. So my ballot was absentee, back to Warwick. I felt bad about that, but I hadn’t lived here long enough.

HS: Right. I think a lot of students feel that way, when Election Day comes around.

Then you said that you first lived in New Hall.

LM: Yes, I lived in New Hall. By the way there was street in front of New Hall, which is not there anymore.

HS: And it’s now Turner Hall, right?

LM: No I don’t think so, I thought—

HS: I think that they renamed it Turner Hall, after Belle Turner who served as the house mother for most of the women’s halls. I think so.

LM: Oh, I did not know that.

I lived on the second floor. Now, first floor there was a lovely entry and then a large room—lounge, meeting room whatever. On the second floor, the rooms were built for doubles, but there was a large enrollment and there were three of us who roomed together. Ann Bluchell (?) was from California, Gwen Gholson from Burke...Do you know Burke...Do you know Burke, Idaho, at all? It’s this side of Wallace, just a small ways from Wallace, and to get there it’s such a narrow canyon, that the road, the railroad, the bridge over the little stream all come together at once. Her dad was a mining engineer. I know that because she invited me to there for Thanksgiving, and I was there to see it all go together.

Lillian McCammon Interview, OH 446-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
The three of us roomed together, and Ann has a very sad story, which she eventually shared with us. Her dad was a physician in California where her little brother accidentally shot and killed the next door neighbor boy. So they moved, and they moved to Missoula somewhere near the...some home near the base of Mount Sentinel. Ann, they felt, should be part of the school and wanted her in a dorm. I’ll tell you she had more cosmetics, more clothes than Gwen and I put together. She took one whole side of the room that we had, closets drawers, etcetera. Gwen and I shared the other.

Another thing that I remember about New Hall, there was a gal from Butte. People from Butte are very special, and I was chosen to go to some fraternity dance or whatever but it was a jeans affair. Now New York State jeans at that time were very wide and baggy. Some of them are now, but then they were. Here they were tight, so I knew I wasn’t going to fit in very well. This wonderful girl from Butte said, “Lillian, here, you can wear my jeans.” (laughs)

A fun memory too, there was a girl from Glendive—Shirley DeForce and I became friends while I was at New Hall. She and I decided we’re going to walk not just to the M, but to the top of the mountain, Mount Sentinel. We did, and we added our rocks to the pile. On the way down we saw two mountain goats.

HS: Oh, wow!

LM: It was such a treat.

HS: Yes, I don’t think that you would ever see that—

LM: I was glad that I came to Montana.

HS: Yes, I don’t think that there are mountain goats there anymore unfortunately.

So was it a tradition for students to put a rock if you got all the way to the very top of the hill to put a rock up there.

LM: Well I thought it was a tradition whenever you climbed a mountain, you added a rock.

HS: Really? Okay.

LM: Shirley and I knew it, but I don’t know whether that is still being done or not.

HS: Maybe. I do see people pile rocks sometimes at various spots on a trail. Yes, that’s interesting.
So then New Hall was...the house mother for New Hall was Belle Turner. Was she the house mother when you were there?

LM: I don’t recall the name of the house mother, but I know I had a problem. I went shopping and wanted to send some western things to my mom and my brother for Christmas. I needed help to pack, to carry the box, and all. I had met George the first Sunday we were both here. He was from Eastern [Eastern Montana College of Education] and he had a little black Chevy, and he offered to help me. I opened the door of the dorm and had him come in. The house mother caught us with this package that I needed help with. I knew I was in trouble, but she said, “Well, okay, go ahead and finish.”

HS: (laughs) So men were not allowed in the women’s dorms.

LM: Not at all.

HS: So you met your now husband right before you needed help with the package?

LM: Well, yes. We met our first Sunday here. We both went to First Methodist Church. The First Methodist is not the way it was then. They’ve remodeled it. There’s a wonderful stained glass window in the east that has to stay in the east. So if you go there now and look in the balcony, you’ll see this. Well, George wanted to sit where he could see that, which happened to be next to me, and then he offered a ride back. There was come back in the evening for Wesley fellowship and all that so we got acquainted. Very often on weekends he took me on rides, so I got to learn that the whole hillside up above Seeley [Lake] is not dying. It’s just larch that loses its needles every fall. Every bit of it I loved it.

HS: Well, that was really nice of him to help you with the package.

LM: Yes.

HS: And you didn’t get in trouble, so that’s good. (laughs)

LM: Well, almost. (laughs)

HS: When you attended the University, you swam for the Aqumaids?

LM: Yes, that’s one of the first things that I did.

HS: So were you accepted to them before you came out or—?

LM: Oh no, oh no, no there was just an opening, and Deanie—I don’t remember her last name—was our coach. Wonderful, wonderful gal. We also had a tall blonde from Mexico City,
Magda. I think it was M-a-g-d-a, and I don’t remember her last name either. She had been a member of the Mexican Olympic team. She was very, very good, and I just relished swimming didn’t matter what. I was very pleased to be a part of that.

The second year we had newer students coming in, but several of us who stayed the second year were asked to take a group of girls and develop our own routines. So I think that’s what we did, and we had our own routine—five of us. I do recall a bundle of P.E. instructors from several colleges around coming, and we performed for them. That’s one thing. This was all done in the old men’s gym. What are there, bleachers five or six high? I don’t know what’s over there now, but that’s where we performed. We never could have very much of an audience because it wasn’t very big but we all enjoyed what we did. It was fun.

HS: So you performed in Schreiber? Was that the gymnasium?

LM: Old men’s gym.

HS: Old men’s gym, okay.

LM: I don’t know what it is now?

HS: Is it the one next to the Mansfield Library, the building?

LM: Well, there’s a big parking lot, parking garage there as I recall.

Let me explain when we’re not being recorded because I don’t want to take time.

HS: Oh no, you’re fine. You can explain.

LM: Really?

HS: Yes.

LM: Right now I would like to push having Grace, our activity director, take as many who would like up to the University, put them in golf carts so we could tour. So we could look and see what is where, like you were talking about Schreiber gym. I have no idea what that is. We called it “the men’s gym”, where the pool was. Well now, there’s a new pool. I’d like to drive by what was New Hall. I’d like to drive by all of what I remember and look at what is new, but so far we haven’t done that.

HS: Oh, well—

LM: Maybe in the future sometime.
HS: Yes, that would be a really great activity for homecoming or during commencement.

LM: I was just thinking about folks that live here. We have a lot of university professors here. One of my instructors is Ramona Gray in the water aerobics. She has poli-sci at the U. The person that made her chair lives here. I only know him by Ron. I don’t gather up last names. When we lived at the village, George and Jean Lewis were over there from School of Music. Beautiful voices, and she was a pianist. So much, so, so much to remember. That’s what this has been. It’s been a fun time remembering, and I’ve been jotting a lot of things.

HS: Wonderful! Good, I’m glad.

LM: At New Hall you might...I don’t know whether you know this or not, the winters then were much more severe than now. They started in November—blizzards and Hell Gate winds. When that happened—and remember this is a quarter system so it’s over in December—we were permitted to go through the tunnel from New Hall to Corbin to eat because we all ate at Corbin.

HS: So there was an underground tunnel between the two?

LM: Oh, I’m sure there still is. I’m sure a lot of all kinds of electrical stuff and everything is there.

HS: Right, yes.

LM: We’d appreciated that, so we didn’t have to dress and go outside.

HS: So it must have been nice living in a dorm because it sounds like you made a lot of really wonderful friends while you were there.

LM: Well, it was different. I was 21 they were all 18. I always felt a little bit of difference there, and I should not have because I was just as green as they were as far as college goes, maybe greener. I don’t know. I just enjoyed people.

HS: Well, that’s good. You had a couple of coaches for the Aquamaids, and then—

LM: Well, just Deanie. Deanie was our coach. She helped develop all our routines and so on, but I always looked up to that Magda. She was so tall, blonde, and oh man, could she dive. (laughs) She was good.

HS: Did you have to try out to be an Aquamaid?

LM: You know, I don’t remember that. If I did, I must have made it somehow, and I was doing a little more than dog paddling by then. We all had to take some kind of P.E. class, so I took...
swimming, of course. That would have helped me, by the time I tried out, improve my strokes so I could pass muster a little anyhow.

HS: Were you also taking any dance classes or anything?

LM: Not that first quarter, no. I had played field hockey in my high school. So I took a field hockey class, and I learned that no longer must you always come up with your hockey stick. You must leave it down, and we were not allowed to do that for tripping.

HS: Oh, I see.

LM: So that was hard for me to adjust. I took a ballet class, mainly because I had played clarinet under the director of the New York City Ballet Orchestra. When I taught my first year in Victor [Montana], I had the girls doing some of the ballet for a class or two. I like ballet. I think it makes a person more graceful, so I still like that.

HS: Did it help your routines to have that extra...the ballet experience?

LM: It very well could have, yes, because you do certain things—carry your arms, your head, and so on in a certain way. Yes I would say that.

HS: Okay, interesting.

Is there a particular performance you remember? We have some pictures at the Archives and Special Collections of—I actually brought a few of them here—of girls, and we can tell that they’re dressed in sort of Egyptian-style costumes.

LM: Oh yes, we did all kinds of things.

HS: Was there any...Here we have one of them jumping through a ring of fire actually. (laughs)

LM: (laughs) That was not our group. See if I know anyone here. What year was this?

HS: I’ m not sure. The pictures, the photographs, aren’t dated.

LM: Magda is not in this one, and I don’t see myself. I don’t know about the girl from Polson. I don’t’ think so, but this might be an older picture. Just by the hairstyles.

HS: I see, yes, so maybe the ‘40s.

LM: Right. Oh what fun!
HS: Did you make your own costumes, or where they ordered?

LM: I was trying to think about that, how I had enough money to buy a bathing suit and all that. I just can’t remember. I know we were all alike in our group.

Thank you for sharing those.

HS: Oh sure, absolutely.

What colors were your costumes? Were they really bright?

LM: No. They were not that bright, just all we did was try to match colors. In my mind, ours that second year were green. I don’t know why I remember that.

HS: What else did we...At the archives we love the Aquamaids, so we are very curious about them.

LM: I wish I could tell them about it. I was thrilled to be a member of that team. I looked forward even though the blizzards were really hard to walk through, especially when I moved half a block farther away at Synadelphic, and had to go to practices because I had no car. I just walked over to that old men’s gym. But I always looked forward to whatever swimming we did. Just loved it.

HS: Were you a fan of Esther Williams?

LM: Well, yes. Went to all of her movies, absolutely, yes. She’s very graceful swimmer. Synchronized swimming is so different now, very much different. You watch it from the Olympics. Have you ever done that?

HS: I have occasionally. How is it different?

LM: I think the girls are much more athletic, I think they did a lot more, more gracefully, than what we did. That’s my impression.

HS: Okay. So maybe they are cross-training in dance and competitive swimming.

LM: That could be. That very well could be.

HS: You guys just focused on just the synchronized swimming?

LM: Yes. I was never a racer. I just enjoyed graceful swimming.
HS: Then you said you moved to Synadelphic?

LM: Yes, at the end of winter quarter. I had a friend, and she helped me carry...I had to send a trunk from New York. She helped me carry my trunk from the basement of New Hall to the basement of Synadelphic. Right now I’m not sure what is there, but behind Synadelphic was this beautiful weeping birch. I think it was a birch tree—cut leaf birch maybe. It almost looks like it’s still there. That’s where Synadelphic—three floors. I believe it was a white painted house, maybe four or five steps going to the front door, with a porch. We had a living room to the right as you entered. Our dining room had folding glass doors on the left that we never went in unless we were eating. The kitchen was behind the dining room, and there was, of course, two floors where we all lived. Mrs. Galt—G-a-l-t—was our house mother, and she had a tiny apartment behind the living room on the southwest side of the home.

George and I got in a little trouble there too. (laughs) I was very good at trouble. The night that he proposed, he was very slow doing that and I kept being antsy because I knew I had to be in by this hour. It took a lot of courage for him to ask me, and so we ended up being a little late so I was not a popular person that night. You know, Mrs. Galt was older. I don’t know how old, and she really was a wonderful house mother and a wonderful cook, although she herself rarely cooked. Mary Ellen was the cook when I moved in—Mary Ellen was a senior—and Mrs. Galt gave her the recipe that spring for cream rhubarb pie.

HS: Oh wow!

LM: I have it. I’ll give you a copy when you leave.

HS: I’d love a copy.

LM: It is delicious. So she was really...to keep up with us was quite something. Now Mary Ellen, of course, left, and we all had election of officers at the end of that first year ’52—spring ’52. I was elected president, and during that summer, I had a phone call from someone in administration asking if Synadelphic would consider having high school girls live there. Parents of girls in Seeley Lake didn’t want them on that 50-mile bus ride twice a day, and they came to see if we could house some of them. We did. He told me I was very astute, and that word has bothered me ever since because the first thing I said was, “We need the money.” (laughs) Well anyhow, we did have the girls come, and it worked out. I remember Florence, sort of a red haired. She was a freshman at one of the high schools here, Missoula County High School then, I guess. Let’s see…the other girl...There were three other girls, one was real dark-haired—pretty little girl. They worked in so well. The parents left them off Sunday night. Friday late in the afternoon they came and picked them up. But The girls pitched in while they were there.

Synadelphic was a co-op. Mary Ellen cooked until she left, and for some reason I volunteered to be the bathroom cleaner. That’s what my mother always had me do at home, so I was an
expert. We had a bathroom on the second floor with a tub, and a bathroom on the third floor with a tub. On the third floor lived a girl that had goldfish, and every Saturday morning when I wanted to clean that’s the time she wanted her goldfish to swim in the bathtub. Actually I don’t think I ever remember cleaning that bathtub. It had goldfish. Oh dear.

Another thing that I remember that happened on our second floor bathroom. We had two grad assistants, Nikki (?) in zoology. Nikki would go out in the spring on field trips, and of course, there was the ticks. Right then I don’t think it was yet time for the shots that we eventually, or tablets whatever we eventually got because the place in Hamilton [Rocky Mountain Laboratories] had not yet developed anything for sure. So Nikki came home with a tick in her thigh. Usually you take a match and burn it, blow it out, and the heat will usually cause a tick to back up and out. Didn’t work. I was in that bathroom and Nikki pinched her thigh, took a razor blade and cut it out. But she didn’t want Rocky Mountain Fever, so I remember that very vividly.

Other memories of Synadelphic. There were five of us at the head of the stairs and a so called second floor bedroom, but none of us slept there. That’s where we had our clothes, our dressers, and so on. Two of the girls slept upstairs. Three of us slept on the sleeping porch that was just outside a door on the south side of our “quote” bedroom. Believe me, January, February was very cold. We put out a glass of water that never thawed. I think it was late March, maybe early April. We piled on all the blankets. We put our three cots together, and we had thickness of blankets and quilts to keep us warm. I happened to write my mother and tell her about this sleeping experience. She sends us an electric blanket, but we were so afraid it wouldn’t be warm. One night we piled on, and I said, “You know, this is not safe. You have to let the electric blanket alone.” After that, we never had a problem being warm. We all cuddled up our cots together, and it worked out.

One of the girls in out five-person bedroom, worked all the time she was there, at least the two quarters of ’52. That would be Kay. Had a sewing machine in that room. She worked all the time both quarters making her wedding dress.

HS: Oh wow!

LM: Yes. She was a wonderful sewer.

Next door to our room on the northeast side of the building were two girls, Ruby and, I think it was Delores. Ruby Lindstrom, I remember Ruby’s name because Ruby and I student taught together in the fall of ’53 in Deer Lodge. Delores had a job a block or two from campus and not far from the base of Mt. Sentinel helping Lillian Speer—S-p-e-e-r. Lillian had taught in Deer Lodge. Her brother had been either principal or superintendent in Deer Lodge. She was blind and no longer, of course, teaching, but she needed help because her sister Lucille Speer...Do you know that name?
HM: Wasn’t she, I know she worked at the University. She and then J.B. Speer as well.

LM: Yes, there’s J.B. Lucille was librarian.

HM: That’s right.

LM: Yes. So Delores wanted to give up her job and asked me if I would take it, and I arranged my classes so that I worked an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon with Lillian. Every morning we would go for a walk. In the spring, that spring...ah!...as we turned the corner, Dr. Ames lived on that corner and had the most beautiful garden. Now I can’t remember, what are those spikes? I know it’s some place in here, but I don’t want to go through all of that. Lupine. Every color you’d want to imagine. Mostly you seen blue or white out in the wild. But he had every color, and Lillian Speer as blind as she was, she must know when we turn that corner. “Now here is Dr. Ames garden,” she would point that out. She was something else.

Then occasionally she’d want me to wax her floor in the kitchen. “Now don’t put too much on.” “You’re putting too much on,” and I hadn’t even started, the poor lady. She also had talking books from Helena. These were records at that time. They had a little built in table and chair where they had their meals off the kitchen, and that’s where she kept her record player. I know that the minute I was out the door, she was listening to something on that.

She was quite a lady. She would grab my arm, and away we would go on that walk. I really enjoyed her. She was very inspirational actually.

HM: In what way?

LM: Just because of what she could do, what she pointed out being while she was at the same time not able to see. I think she always had a positive attitude, never did I hear anything. Many years later when George and I heard she was ill—she had cancer I believe—and went to see her, still the same buoyant self, you know. She was lying on the davenport then, but I feel fortunate that I got that job.

HM: Yes, you got to meet somebody really wonderful.

LM: Special, yes.

HM: Did you know her sister Lucille?

LM: No. No, I didn’t know her at all. No, I got the job just on the basis of Delores recommending. I think that Lillian and Lucille probably looked to Synadelphic because none of us had much money and we were living without. That’s why I never minded pitching in helping there. After Mary Ellen left, my friend Delores Gilskey took over the cook’s job. Delores’s story...
is rather sad. She also worked at the Chimney Corner, do you know? The Chimney Corner is catty corner; there might be something over there, restaurant or little something. I’m not sure now.

HS: Where is located, or where was it located?

LM: Well it’s catty cornered from Synadelphic.

HS: Oh okay.

LM: To park in front of Synadelphic you go nowhere, because New Hall is right in front of it. So although it’s four corners, you can’t go anywhere east, except for a short half block. The Chimney Corner was catty cornered from there. Delores worked over at the Chimney Corner, but she also cooked at our house. Delores had a wonderful voice, just wonderful, and she had a cowboy act. She put on her old jeans and shirt, and old battered cowboy hat. Plaster her hand with tape, which you’re not supposed to see and she was tough. She would smoke that cigarette, and put it out in the palm of her hand, and sing.

HS: She would sing country western songs?

LM: Yes, yes. She was wonderful. The sad thing is she wanted to get into music. Her dad said, “I will pay your way if you take business,” and that was not Delores’s cup of tea so Delores left us and joined the Marines.

HS: Wow.

LM: She married, eventually married, had two little girls. Her husband was killed, but she came back. She’s from Lewistown. Came back there and married Hruska—H-r-u-s-k-a—which a very common name around Lewistown.

But Delores was the one that invited me for Christmas. I hadn’t even moved into, hardly moved into Synadelphic. So I spent Christmas in Lewistown, her sister and husband showed me through a gypsum mine there, and a gypsum mine is white inside. It’s not black. That was an illuminating little bit...it was a shock to go in that mine, but it was very nice of Delores to have me. George picked me up and I met his folks, and then we both came back to school.

So many things. My major was Spanish, only because they started a class of Spanish. The only other language in Warwick High was Latin, but a lady from the Spanish edition of the Reader’s Digest over the Hudson River—where the Reader’s Digest was located—came and taught our Spanish class at high school. I had two years and thought, This is fascinating. I know they assigned me to the math department, because my advisor first of all was someone there...Can’t remember his name, George something. That’s true. I aced...100 percent in New York State Spanish.
Regents algebra, 100 percent New York State Regents geometry, but I thought Spanish was more fascinating. (laughs)

I had Thora Sorenson. I had, I think his name was Paul Bischoff, and I can’t remember which man I had but his wife went out of town for a week or two. Well, who’s doing his laundry? He is. He ironed only the part of his white shirt that showed underneath his sport coat, and he showed us that. (laughs) He actually revealed that.

Oh, another thing that I remember, I had Jules Karlin one time for...I don’t know whether you know him. He was the tennis coach.

HS: I don’t think so.

LM: Everyone warned me not to take a class from him, he’ll flunk you. Well, I did. I took a U.S. history class from him. In fact, I had to do a paper, and in doing it I wrote to some professor down in Texas and made his reply part of my report. Actually, that’s the only reason I came out with a C because he was hard. Every day he walked into class. He was a very wiry man, athletic. He picked up a piece of chalk. I don’t know who supplied him with all that chalk. His window was always open, didn’t matter what the temperature was outside. He’d pace back and forth in front of the board, off came a piece of that chalk he had in his left hand, out the window it went. He kept doing that all during the class.

HS: He would just chip off pieces of the chalks?

LM: That’s right, and toss them. He was quite a character, but I liked his class but I didn’t do well. Dr. Chamberlin was Hispanic-American history. My high school had not done anything. While I was in high school, the World War Two was on. Many of our men teachers were in service, and the first married gals were there. They had to fill in. Never before had they been hired. You had to be single or you didn’t teach. Well, we had a lot of married gals. In other words, we had a lot of people who had no experience teaching, had been away from school for a while. So I came out here, I did not know how to write. I did not know how to do a lot of things. But Dr. Chamberlin called me in one day, and suggested that this would help me improve. And that was in Hispanic-American history, because in the Spanish field I had to take a lot of that—South American as well as the Iberian Peninsula—history. I’ll never forget that, because I think that really helped especially after my disaster with Karlin.

HS: So he thought that because of your background and your knowledge of the Spanish language, you would feel more comfortable in a class about Spanish history?

LM: Well I took...My major was Spanish, but I had the fewest number of credits there. I wanted to be able to fall back, and to fall back I wanted business. The only thing I’d taken in high school was a torturous semester of typing. Torturous because I registered late, got in that class and
the only type writer left for me was one that had all the keys labeled—Qwerty. None of the others, every other type writer was black.

HS: Oh okay.

LM: That was the way they thought should be, typing should be taught then and that’s not a good way. I went through that semester feeling guilty. I could see what keys I was hitting, which wasn’t a good feeling for me. Our high school was different, and maybe that’s, a part of that was because of the war.

So I took a lot of business, and I just love that Brenda Wilson. She was strict. Lot of people didn’t like her, but she could teach shorthand. To this day I do shorthand. At one point I was secretary of six different organizations, all taking shorthand and transcribing the minutes.

Reva Taylor and I—Reva lived at Synadelphic too—were her top students. Each of us reached 160. I only got two 160s because then George and I got married and I left school for a while. But Reva made her three, and her name may if it’s still...they still have those plaques for who writes rapid shorthand, she should have her name there. She and I still correspond at Christmas. She was very good.

HS: So she reached 160 words?

LM: One hundred and sixty words a minute, or above. Some people go up higher. But Brenda taught us shorthand. She exposed us to the old anniversary. She exposed us to this. So much more than what was being taught then. The anniversary whatever it was—the new diamond jubilee shorthand or whatever.

HS: Oh I see.

LM: Let’s see what other—

HS: So can you talk about the difference between a co-op and a dorm? Because I don’t think people...Synadelphic was founded for girls who didn’t have a lot of money—

LM: That’s right, I didn’t.

HS: —and what was the purpose...The purpose of it was to allow them to sort of work for part of their room and board? Was that—?

LM: Yes, well in a dorm, if it’s still that way, someone comes in and cleans. You don’t have to worry about cleaning bathrooms or showers or whatever. It’s all done. The halls are kept clean. The lounge is kept clean. At Synadelphic each one of us, including those high school girls had
job. I wish I could remember what jobs the younger girls had, but dishes—breakfast, lunch, dinner dishes. The dining room had to be kept clean, the living room had to be kept clean, the stairways. I was bathroom. Maybe there was a lunch cook. I can’t remember all the different jobs, because there may only have been 20 of us there. We had to also support Mrs. Galt.

HS: Oh I see.

LM: I’m pretty sure part of that was for her.

HS: So part of your fee was to make sure that she had—

LM: It could have been. I’m not 100 percent on that one.

Another thing I did get in trouble with. I think that, that’s because...I was on the list for Mortar Board, but I didn’t make it and I think I know why. Mrs. Galt asked me that spring if I wouldn’t please take out her storm window and put in her screens. This is when George and I were talking about getting married, and my head was not on. It completely flew out of my head until a few days later she said, “Well, I asked Marjorie (?)”—vice president—“and she put my screens on,” and I felt like this. She was one of the house mothers along with the sorority house mothers, that I’m sure they have input on who goes into Mortar Board, and I think sunk me right there, which is all right.

It’s funny what you remember, and think, Oh boy. Anyhow—

HS: So then by doing that work it made the cost of living in a co-op a lot less expensive than living than living in a residence hall?

LM: Very much, yes. Very much so because we did the work. We didn’t hire anybody. We were it.

HS: That women’s co-op was started by Harvey Baty. He was the director of the Montana School of Religion on campus.

LM: That sort of rings a bell. I thought it was a wonderful thing. I don’t know that I would have really gone as far in college as I did. Summers, Synadelphic was closed so I roomed with a “Synner”. Annette Pesman had graduated, and she knew I was looking for some place to room during summer. She was on at the Forest Service. She finished her business degree and went to work for the Forest Service. She went on the G.I. bill. She had worked out at the dam—the Missouri River dam over there. Everybody knows the name of it, and now it’s gone out of my head.

HS: That’s okay. I don’t know the name of it.
LM: Yes, you do, I know it’s so...on the Missouri, the big dam over near Poplar—northeastern part of the state on the Missouri River [Fort Peck Dam]. Well, anyhow that’s where she worked with the [U.S.] Army. She had an apartment on 433 McLeod upstairs, below which our landlords lived. Let’s see what was their names now? Oh—

HS: Is it [W.] Penn Stohr?

LM: Yes, yes. The second summer I was there, poor Penn crashed his plane. I can’t remember what kind it was. He crashed his plane on the eastern side of the Elkhorn Mountains out of Townsend—between Townsend and Helena—and was killed.

HS: He was a smokejumper, right?

LM: Not the jumper. He was the pilot. Pilot for smokejumpers and for the retardant that they sprayed to help prevent the spread of those fires. He had two children, Penn, Jr., and a daughter, and our whole household was just really devastated with his death. That was a big loss to the Forest Service.

HS: What was he like?

LM: The only thing I remember about Penn Stohr, Sr. is that he would come home so hot and exhausted. His face would be red, just from whatever he was involved in with his flying. He flew a lot. Very, very sad affair to lose him.

But We had nice rooms, Annette and I would...weekends when she wasn’t working we hiked way up into the Rattlesnake area. There still is a pool along the interstate [I-90]. It wasn’t the interstate then. We would drive east on the highway, and on the north side of the highway was a little waterfall coming in forming a pool. If you go someplace between here and Drummond, you’ll pass it. Annette would pull her car off, and she and I would swim there in the summer.

Talking about swimming in the summer, there was a boy from Butte. I think he was in the School of Music, but I could have him mixed up with someone else. He was short. He was about my height. He and I would meet on campus by the Student Union, which is not where it is now, but I think it’s the school for art or something.

HS: Fine Arts building now.

LM: Fine Arts? He and I would meet there, and we’d walk down to city outdoor pool, which was in McCormick Park where the indoor pool is now. Yes, so we often went swimming all summer long there.
HS: So your major was Spanish?
LM: Believe it or not.

HS: You said something about student teaching?

LM: Yes. I minored in history, political science, and business education.

HS: Wow!

LM: Well, before I met George, I thought, I think with my Spanish I could travel to Mexico and get a job of some kind. (laughs) My friend Dixie, who graduated from Stanford, had gotten a job with the State Department or whatever in Lebanon.

HS: Wow.

LM: Yes, and I thought well maybe I could do something similar. Yet I never did, and I’ve lost my Spanish now.

When I taught, student taught, in Deer lodge, I had a class in history. Kemmesat was my supervising teacher I remember. Let’s see...I know I had a class in Spanish, and I must have had a class in...Ruby’s major was business so she got more business classes student teaching than I did. I know I had another class. I think we each had three classes.

HS: So you didn’t have to be part of the School of Education to student teach? Necessarily.

LM: Well, I don’t know whether you could call Brenda Wilson with her shorthand...I think that was more for teaching actually.

HS: Oh, so she taught you shorthand so you could teach it?

LM: Well, that’s a good way of putting it. I never thought of that. I just liked shorthand. I always thought of shorthand as a language that you spoke through your fingertips, and I love shorthand. I still use it. It’s amazing that I did this [indicates to handwritten notes], when I was thinking through things because everything I do I do in shorthand. Except what I want somebody else to read.

HS: Right, because they don’t teach shorthand anymore.

LM: No, they don’t.

HS: That’s a shame.
LM: I taught it in Victor, and I taught it at Missoula Sentinel, and I taught it in Helena. Oh, and I even taught a little at an adult ed class in Townsend when we moved there.

HS: What class was your favorite here at the University? Shorthand?

LM: You know I think it was, yes. Although I like challenges so I liked Karlin's class. He was very good, but I couldn’t write his exams. The Hispanic-American history classes were very, very interesting. I liked that.

There was Margaret Swanson who taught typing. If I were to do a turn-around in typing, it would have been through Margaret. Later when I was teaching at Sentinel, Missoula hosted the Montana Business Education Fall Conference—teachers' conference here. Those of us teaching here—and maybe it was the year that I got acquainted with business teachers in the Bitterroot, Hamilton, Stevensville—we got together. We worked with Margaret Swanson on a program in business education for teachers all over the state. We thought so highly of...She was a wonderful, wonderful person, that we decided her gift for a thank you gift was going to be special. So we pooled our money, and every month, for I think it was a whole year, we sent her a rose from the florist. I think she got tired of sending us thank-you notes. (laughs) Oh dear, but I just, I loved Margaret Swanson and I loved that Brenda Wilson in business, and I'd never, ever taken anything in business except that horrid typing class in high school.

HS: (laughs) What were some of the challenges of being a student? You mentioned being older than a lot of the girls you knew.

LM: I think that was in my head. What really used to bother me at Synadelphic...because just as at New Hall, every living group had to choose someone when a fraternity gave a dance or some kind of affair. I remember if I were chosen, and I was, thinking, Oh dear, I'm really not anybody to send. They all are up here in fraternities and sororities, and this where I am—way low, low. I don’t count for anything. So I had a very much inferiority complex, I think, all through college. Yet I was older. I didn’t feel that I really fit in except at Synadelphic. There was no question there. I always felt very good, very accepted even though I gave Mrs. Galt a hard time a time or two. I just liked Synadelphic. It was good place; it was a good fit. I’ll put it that way

HS: It sounds like you made a lot of friends there too.

LM: Yes, oh yes.

HS: Do you still keep in touch with some of them?

LM: Yes, Delores, especially with Delores Gilskey, not the other Delores. Then Joan...You know what? We roomed together that second year at Synadelphic. I got out of the sleeping porch. We roomed in a just a very tight, small bunkbed-type thing. She was from Choteau or nearby
Choteau—some little town there. She said, “Lillian, I’d like to give you my Mormon bible.” I was just really complimented. I mean, I felt so good that she felt I could have her bible.

HS: Yeah, that was really sweet.

LM: So that made me feel special, and Joan and I corresponded up until just a few years ago. She had about four children, three or four boys and one girl—girl in Hawaii I think. Her husband and she published the Choteau paper. I can’t remember the name of it, but I liked Joan too.

HS: Did you keep in touch with any of the Aquamaids you swam with or were you close with any of them?

LM: No, I don’t know why. Again it might have been a feeling that they were all so much higher than I. A lot of them were sorority girls, and I wasn’t.

HS: Oh I see, yes. You just liked to swim.

LM: Yes, that was my only talent right there, if you could call it a talent. (laughs)

HS: (laughs) What advice would you give to students who are coming to the University?

LM: First of all, search out your interest and follow that interest. Be friendly. You know there’s that walk—Hello Walk. Do they still have that?

HS: They do have the Hello Walk, but it’s not really a tradition anymore, I don’t think, to say hello.

LM: Get acquainted with students from other places. Get acquainted with someone from Africa. Get acquainted from someone from Canada. The world is a small place now.

[Telephone rings; break in audio]

HS: If you had advice for students?

LM: Oh yes. And I was saying—

HS: Be friendly—

LM: Be friendly—

HS: Get to know people from other places—

Lillian McCammon Interview, OH 446-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
LM: Get to know people. Follow your interest. And know the community not just people on campus. I think that’s important to spread out because you will be part of that community when you leave the university. I think that’s where I’ll end it.

HS: You chose to stay here in Missoula.

LM: Well, no exactly. We had a hard time when we first married. Again, money, money, money wasn’t there. So George had a gas station, and we had to sell that. He went to work for the highway department. In the meantime, I went down to Victor for one year and taught there, and I loved those kids. Then Darlene Smith, who had the business department at Sentinel, called and asked if I would take her job with the advanced classes—the two-hour block shorthand—again. So and then George was commuting from Victor here to the highway, and he knew there was going to be the four-lane being built between Lolo and Missoula. So we decided not to remain in Victor, which was our kids’ choice—Barbara with her horse, and Don fishing in Sweathouse Creek. But George and I prevailed, and we moved back here. After two years here, he was transferred to Helena, so we lived in Helena for eight or nine years. Found when our kids both finished at Helena High, Barbara finished in...what year was it? I can’t remember now. Both kids started here.

HS: At the University?

LM: At the University. George and I did not help. We had no help. I had no help. George had a bill—the G.l. bill—but it doesn’t cover everything, and he lived with Dr. Wesley and Mrs. Clark on McLeod in the basement. Our kids with savings accounts and so on paid their own way here. Don stayed here two years and got a full ride engineering scholarship at Bozeman, and instead of going with highway construction. Burlington Northern grabbed him. He went with them—Minneapolis, St. Paul, Kansas City, Denver. When they decided they were moving their headquarter to Texas. He and Donna, “No,” they said. He put his resume out. H.D.R., who has an office here, and this is Don’s favorite spot. He never claimed Helena, because he was in grade school here and he liked here. So they’re here, and we like that.

Barbara, two years here went back to visit my mother, and by golly she was one of the 1,000 out of 10,000 applying for the police academy in New York City. So she spent seven years on the N.Y.P.D., and got her degree from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Married her husband, was transferred to Boise, and she went. They eventually, after a year or two, divorced. In the meantime, she joined the Idaho Air National Guard in intelligence. After about six deployments in Near East, Saudi and Bahrain and the United Emirates and all of that, and then one up in Turkey—the northern no fly zone—they deployed her to Tampa, Florida, with intelligence. She spent two years there and was going back for another stint when she was killed in a traffic accident on the way.

HS: I’m sorry to hear that.
LM: So, yes, that was very hard for us. So we have Don, and that’s all we have in our family. Anyhow, everybody liked Missoula, and Don always claimed Missoula. We used to take them skiing up Marshall. Even Ms. Speer had George drive us up Marshall Gulch so she could show us her favorite flowers. How she knew where to stop, I know not, because she couldn’t see a thing.

HS: But she did?

LM: But she did, yes! She was amazing.

So yes we had wonderful, wonderful experiences here at the University. I love the MOLLI classes here. I’m hoping they get back to the School of Music because we really like Broadway. We just loved Broadway music.

My dad and I...There was blizzard just like this one in ‘46 maybe. My dad treated us to a weekend in New York for Christmas. We went on the Warwick Stage lines, and the snow started falling—seven o’clock in the morning. After about an hour or two the bus driver got tired waiting in line. You go through New Jersey from Warwick. He said, “I know a shorter way,” and he got stuck so we pulled out our luggage and trudged over to the ferry. Got over to New York where we took a subway to Penn Station. Luckily at ten o’clock at night when we finally got there, after usually a two-hour bus drive, bus ride, anyhow we got there and they had not cancelled our reservations. My mother and my brother went to Madison Square Garden to see a game. My dad and I went to see the original Oklahoma with Alfred Drake. See he used to play in a big band, my dad did. We got his clarinets.

That’s another regret. That I did not do anything with music. All of the people that I played clarinet under thought that I should buy a really nice clarinet, but my folks gave my brother my dad’s four different clarinets—set of B-flat, A, C, with the Albert System. Well, they bought me a tin horn costing 25 dollars—Boehm System.

Do you play at all?

HS: Not the clarinet or horn.

LM: Well, the clarinet in the old Albert System has a long stretch between keys with these two fingers. The Albert’s just like this, newer system...or the Boehm I should say. I regret that I have not done that, but George and I both enjoy music. Our son sings here with the [Missoula] Symphony Chorale. I think he’s singing in February. So I don’t know...

There’s so much here—the outdoors, the mountains, the flowers that grow. I like the flowers, and here I understand Missoula is a zone five, and Townsend where we lived was a zone two or
three, depending on how harsh the winters were. Townsend couldn’t grow as much as Missoula does. It’s marvelous to see what can grow here.

HS: Any other memories or thoughts? Or is this a good place to stop?

LM: That probably is a good ending. You’ve drawn out a lot, a lot of memories. It’s been a pleasure to think through a lot of things and remember a lot of people. You know, your mind just goes back and back and back, and it’s wonderful to relive all of that.

HS: Well, it’s been a pleasure listening, and thank you so much for doing this.

LM: Good luck. (laughs) Good luck to the transcriber, I know—

[End of Interview]