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Oral History Number: 262-004

Interviewee: Florence "Flo" Majerus

Interviewer: Eloise Sagmiller

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Eloise Sagmiller: Were you born in Montana?

Florence Majerus: No; actually, I was born in Moscow, Idaho. I've had a lot of fun with that too when people say, "Where were you born?" and I say, "Moscow." But I lived all my life on a cattle ranch south of Havre up in the Bearpaw Mountains. It just happened that I was born in Idaho and that was in 1916 which was a couple of years ago.

ES: So your family was in ranching, then?

FM: Yes. I used to think I was quite a cowgirl. I never thought of putting wings on it.

ES: Well, did you help your dad (inaudible)?

FM: Well, like at that time of course and through the bad years of the Depression, yeah, we all worked on the ranch. But I went to a small rural school out there and then went to Havre High School and then also went to Northern Montana College up there. I started out in college to be a journalist. I thought that would be great. I guess I could see myself as a Marguerite Higgins or something but the journalists were starving to death on Street corners, so I took up teaching. I was a teacher.

ES: Where did you teach?

FM: First school I taught in was way down by Scobey, and then I taught near Havre, and then I went up to Alaska and spent quite a while in Alaska working with Federal Aviation (or Civil Aviation, it was called then, CAA). Then when we came back here, I went back into teaching.

ES: Did your whole family move to Alaska?

FM: No, they stayed on the ranch. In fact, the ranch still has nephews on it. We kept it in the family up there. But I decided to go up there one summer when school was out. I thought I'd just go up there and see what was going on. I got a job playing piano in a nightclub in Ketchikan. I made more money in one night than I made in three weeks teaching school. I said, "Yay! Utopia! I ain't ever going to leave this place!"

So, I stayed in Alaska and I got married up there (however this was) to a fellow I had known in Montana. Then we went into CAA, which was where I first got interested in flying, really.

ES: How does a nice girl like you end up playing piano in a nightclub?

FM: I'm kind of a piano player, you know, that old joke, the fellow who went up to the musician and he said, "I say, old boy, do you know your fly is open?"

The fellow said, "No, but if you hum a few bars, I'll try it." Well, I played a lot by ear and I've played in dance orchestras near Havre, and I just happened to be in a good place to get a job. I got to Ketchikan and this nightclub wanted a musician—I'm not kidding. It was that type of thing. They'd say, "Can you play this song?" I'd say, "Hum a bit of it," and you'd hum a bit of it and they'd say, "Oh, she knows my song," and you could finish up with most anything, but they'd leave you a big tip, so that's what happened to me in Alaska.

ES: About what year was that?

FM: That was 1940.

ES: Just before the big onslaught of people.

FM: It was 1940 when I first was in Ketchikan. I stayed there for awhile and then I decided to go up to Anchorage. I went up to Anchorage and got a job. I was playing some there too, but I was working in a photo shop and I was going to go up to Fairbanks because I had a couple of cousins there and some people I knew from Havre. I had told them "I'm coming to Fairbanks next Saturday." I had written them a letter. Before the letter even got there, one of these fellows came down through Anchorage and said, "I'm on my way south."

I said, "Go over to Alaska Steamship Company and get me a ticket; I'll go too." When you're young and foolish you do a lot of things like that. So I got married and came back up the next year. After that we went into CAA.

ES: Was be a pilot?

FM: No, he was not and be retired from FAA but he said he never had any desire to get a pilot's license because be bad had to watch too many people through the window, watching them land and being afraid they wouldn't make it He said, "I don't want any part of that." He wasn't interested in it, but I was. I worked with FAA (radio and meteorology) and I was interested then in getting a pilot's license. They did have some trainers up there, but some of these wartime—they weren't kept up too well, and some of these training planes had a nasty habit of losing a wing in midair, and I thought, "I don't care about that." So I just worked for the radio station there.

ES: I understand the weather in Alaska is pretty terrible for pilots. Lots of fog and lots of freezing fog.

FM: You see the land mass of Alaska superimposed on the US. Of course, it stretches from key west to Seattle; you get a wide variation in weather. Southwestern and southeastern it is very rainy, very foggy, poor visibility and all that. Fairbanks and in the interior usually had a lot more clear sunny weather. But they would get this 60 below temperature and there would be ice-fog right on Fairbanks. Sometimes we'd have planes come in there who could see the runway but the weather bureau had to put out what they saw which would maybe be an eighth of a mile visibility, so they couldn't get in. Here'd be these planes circling Fairbanks and circling Fairbanks, trying to get down but weather was a problem, yes.

ES: I understand that the Army came in about the time of the War and they built airfields and airstrips and things that were not in existence before. Were you in on that sort of thing?

FM: Yeah. We were in Fairbanks at that time. We were in several places with FAA in Alaska, but we were in Fairbanks most of the time, and originally there was only one field at Fairbanks, called Ladd Field, which was more or less a dirt runway and in the spring it would get pretty muddy and they'd have quite a time. Then Ladd Field came in just a few miles away and then Eielson Air Force Base was also out there. Sometimes they called it Twenty-six Mile, which was out quite a ways. It was named after a famous old bush pilot, Ben Eielson and maybe a lot of people remember hearing about him.

We had some funny things happen. I can tell you one little funny thing happened one time. These bush pilots, they didn't get used to radio. They'd say, "This is so-and-so," and they'd want weather in the clear. They couldn't go by FAA regulations. There was one fellow had two old Pilgrims up there. He called one the "Bucket of Bolts" and the other one "The Reluctant Dragon." He was flying into Ladd Field one day, and they told him he couldn't get in there; it was too muddy. Better go to Ladd Field.

So he went over to Ladd Field and he said, "Ladd Tower, Ladd Tower. This is The Reluctant Dragon coming in for a landing." Of course, the Oriental connotation on that, there was a rookie tower operator, and he alerted the base and I guess they just about shot everything down. The pilot finally climbed down on the wing and found the number of his plane and gave the number of the plane, but he was so used to us over there at FAA who would understand whatever they said. This maybe isn't what you want but these are just little funny stories of things that have happened.

ES: So, how long did you stay in Fairbanks, then?

FM: Well, we were in Alaska about 11 years, I guess. Not all the time in Fairbanks. The first FAA station we went to was a little—we were in Fairbanks when we went into FAA. The first station we went to after we went down to school in Anchorage for a while was down at Kenai. Now, Kenai is quite a metropolitan center, almost, right now. But at that time there was only one way to get in there, by flying. Or in summer they had boats down there. So, it was really quite an outpost. We were the only, well, with the racial discrimination I shouldn't say "white people,"

but it was a Native town and we were the only ones that were there other than Alaskan natives, who were not Eskimos. They were Aleuts, I guess. But it was interesting; got to know all of them. Then later we went back to Fairbanks because we felt that was our home out there.

ES: So you and your husband were both radio operators?

FM: Right.

ES: Did he continue to do the same thing after you came back here?

FM: Yes. I worked with FAA for 10 years or so up there and then we decided to come back to Montana mostly for family reasons. You know, if you're a long ways away like that and your family's here, you trunk you should be around a little bit. So he transferred back out here but there was not room for two operators here. Lewistown was a small station. What they call a one-man operated. In other words, there was one person on watch all the time. So even if I had been able to get a transfer, I would have gone to work at four, he would have gone to work at eight and all that kind of stuff, so I just quit, and I went back into teaching then when we got down here. But he worked here until he retired. But he never got interested in getting a pilot's license.

ES: So you got your license after you came back to Montana.

FM: Right. And the instructor here was—did you ever find Bob Cook? Bob Cook who is over—I think he's in St Ignatius. But of course, there are a lot of Bob Cooks. It's a common name. But Bob Cook taught high school commercial subjects over here and he also was a pilot. Had an instructor's rating and he gave pilots lessons. So I got my ticket, my pilot's license with Bob Cook and he used to tease me all the time. I remember at some pilot's gathering he gave Mel a special award "above and beyond the call of duty" for flying with me.

I first learned in a 150 and then we went in with a bunch of fellows and we bought a 172, and we decided we wanted something a little faster. A lot of the pilots here, men and women both, would get a pilot's license and their idea of flying was, "Let's go flying." So they'd get up in the air and go around the patch and land. Then they'd go around the patch twice and land. Then they'd go around the patch three times and land. Then maybe they'd get halfway to Stanford and look back and figure they couldn't see the runway and say, "My god, I've gotta get home." In other words, they didn't want to go anyplace.

But I wanted to fly places. So the fellows that I was in this club with got a Moonie, which was a low wing, for one thing, which is good in the windy areas like this, and also it traveled a little better. It had a better cruising speed. So we went all over the country in that. Mel and I flew into Minnesota and went down to land at Austin and there was a terrific cross-wind. We had that low-wing airplane, so I landed there in it and I looked at Mel and his face was tied in fifty knots. I said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "I'm never, never, never going to set foot in this plane again."

I said, "What's the matter? Didn't you like that landing?"

He said, "It was a hell of a good landing, but I was scared to death before we got down there." We stayed there for two or three days and then we got up one morning and the air was absolutely smooth so we took off again. But I like to fly places, you know, not just go up and shoot landings. However, I was not in it too very long because after you've flown quite a few places and seen everything, you want to do something else, that's one reason. The real reason, it got too damned expensive. It was very expensive to fly if you did not have a business for a tax write-off or something like that.

ES: Did you have a mechanic work on the plane, the rebuilding of the motor?

FM: Let's see. No; there were five of us in that, I think. No, there wasn't anyone who had an A and E license, so if we had to have anything done, we had to get someone else do it. Some of them were able to do mechanic work, like on cars or minor things like that. If we had to have work done on the plan, we had to take it in. It worked out quite well; we didn't have too much trouble of people wanting the plane at the same time.

ES: You didn't have to use it to herd cows?

FM: No. Nothing like that. I haven't been on the ranch for a long, long time. It was just going places.

ES: Did you ever belong to the 99s?

FM: I belonged to the 99s. That was a very interesting organization. I belonged to the Montana Chapter of it and we used to fly quite a bit. We girls would take off and go to one place, which was the starting point. Sometimes it would be here; sometimes somewhere else. We'd have a race. Some of them were something like treasure hunts, in a way. You had to land at this place and pick up something and then you had to land somewhere else and leave something, and that kind of thing so they'd know you were in these places. So we went all over Montana. One time we ended up in Idaho Falls but we didn't go real, real far, but we went to Idaho and Montana.

It was fun because then we'd all get to the destination and have a get-together and dinner and so on. There were a lot of those girls flying then. One of them, Karen Ribbi, was over in Hamilton. Maybe you heard of Ribbi. Maybe that's one you'd want to get too. Her husband, Dr. Ribbi, was head of the Ribbi Clinic, and he cracked up somewhere on the Idaho border here a few years ago. She was one of them, and there were five of us from Lewistown, I guess; quite a few from Billings, and some from Great Falls. I don't even see those girls most of the time anymore but

there were quite a few in Montana.

ES: Was Karen from—

FM: Hamilton. And I think she's still in Hamilton. It's a lab, isn't it? Laboratories. Ribbi Lab.

ES: I love finding someone close to me.

FM: Well, Karen would be one. I don't know if she still flies, but she was quite active in the 99's. I don't think any of our races took us out of Montana except I remember once that we were in Idaho Falls, but we did go to a lot of places in Montana. Usually, it wasn't just going from A to B; it was several stops and pick up something. It went by points. I guess it was partly in how long it took you and by the rating of your airplane and all that kind of stuff, but it also was whether you picked up these things that you were supposed to pick up. I can't even give you an example of what they were. But drop something off or pick something up or something like that. It seems to me that the time element came as to how much time you spent, wasted or dallied around at the stopping points. I just don't really remember for sure. But I don't remember that we went anyplace else. I don't think we had any Canadian girls. I flew a lot around the western states, mostly, and was up in Canada a couple of times.

I know one time we went, three of us. Mel and another fellow and I flew up to Calgary in the wintertime. And we got weathered in. We couldn't get out. Mel wanted to get back to go to work and Jake, the other fellow, had to go to work, so a friend up there, a ham radio operator, gave us a car to drive back. So we drove back home here, and then I took the car up and flew back, flew the plane all alone from Calgary and that was one time I thought, "Boy, I'm really pioneering here, getting way up in Calgary and coming back all alone. You had to find a place to go through customs, of course, and everything. Wasn't any problem, wasn't any farther than anyplace else I've flown, but you're in a foreign country.

ES: How does that work, customs, when you fly into a foreign country like that; do you have to clear the airport?

FM: Yeah. You have to go into it. Now I went into Havre. I think when you file a flight plan you have to tell them where you're going to clear customs, and then they will meet you. And I could have gone to Great Falls or to Havre. I don't think Shelby was one. It had to be Great Falls or Havre. I decided to fly into Havre because of my folks being there and everything.

My little mother used to fly with me, and I had to laugh one time. You know, I'd think, "Oh, my little mother will fly with me; she thinks I'm a good enough flyer to fly with," and so on. One time someone said to her, "Glennie. Aren't you afraid to get into that little plane and fly an over the country?" She wasn't afraid at all; I'd dip the wing and I'd say, "There's a (inaudible)," and dip the wing the other way, and "there's Paul Favor's place." Her response to that was, "No, no not really." She said, "I guess I figure I've lived most of my life, and if I don't live another day it

won't matter." I said, "Mom, you sure knocked the wind out of my sails."

ES: What was your maiden name?

FM: Molitor. My mom's name was Glennie. She was a schoolteacher too. She taught school in Zortman, I remember, back in 1910, 1914, like that. Zortman was a hell-roaring mining town then.

ES: And what was your dad's name?

FM: Nick. She met him in Havre because she taught school up there at Gilford, I think it was, and she met him in Havre. His sister had a ranch up in the Bearpaws and so he got interested in the Bearpaws and filed on land there and that's how come they got into the Bearpaw Mountains. It all seems so long ago. I think this history thing is a good thing to write up because sometimes I think of things I should have had my mother tell me about.

The Bearpaws are good ranch country. They call it mountains but they're not real jagged, shaly mountains. They're more like the Black Hills, I guess you'd say. I mean they have good grazing land in there. Creeks all the time.

ES: When you taught school, did you start, then, here in Lewistown?

FM: No; when I first got out of the school in Havre, I went down near Scobey, a little town named Richland and I taught down there at Richlan,d and then I came back to Havre and taught in a country school up in the Bearpaws. I wanted to get back home and I could stay home and teach up there. From there, I taught there two, three years and then the little episode of where I went to Alaska and said, "Boy, I'm staying up here." That was in '36, '37, in there. That was in the middle of the Big Depression, as they call it Then I stayed up there and got into FAA.

ES: When you taught in the Bearpaws, did you teach in a one-room school?

FM: M'h'm.

ES: How many kids did you have?

FM: Oh, I think one year I had 24.

ES: Oh my, that's a lot. And you're teaching all the grades.

FM: You're teaching all the grades, uh huh. That's a job, but that's the way a lot of those were. And there still are some one-room schools. Most of them don't have that many people, but that many in one grade isn't so bad, but you had all grades. And that was long ago.

ES: Who was the Superintendent of Schools?

FM: You mean, back in Havre? Marion Bainbridge used to be a high school teacher and then she got to be County Superintendent of Schools there. And later she married Elmsley, so Marion Bainbridge Elmsley was the school superintendent there for quite a while. And she, I saw her the last time I was in Havre. She must be in her 90s now. There are a lot of old timers there that would remember back in those old days.

ES: Is she in a rest home now?

FM: No, she's in her own home, Third Avenue in Havre there. Back in those days everybody had a lot of fun. Sometimes I look back and think, "Even with the Depression, people had fun." A lot of these kids at one school I taught, a lot of them rode horseback to school and one of these cowboys we knew, we called him "Tex." Tex drove by there one day before school started and he thought he'd have some fun, so all the kids all knew him, and this is to show you the difference between teaching then and now. He called all those kids; they got him in the barn and told him they locked (inaudible) in the barn. Then he rode up on top of a bill just above there where he could see the barn and the schoolhouse because he wanted to see me ring the bell. So I went out and rang, "Clangity, clang, clang" rang the bell. Schooltime and no kids came. I went out and really clanged that old bell and no schoolkids came. I went out looking for them and they said, "Tex locked us in the barn." That was just a funny little joke then. But can you imagine something like that now. Jeez, they'd be after the schoolteacher, "You're not taking care of those kids, somebody comes around and locks them in the barn," (inaudible). It was a funny little incident then. That was the day Tex locked the kids in the barn. Do you want to hear more on flying or what?

There were a lot of things that happened with flying when I was with CAA up in Alaska, sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, sometimes almost tragic things happen. But one thing that happened, we were in Fairbanks, Anchorage and Kenai and Juneau. Good friends who were in Juneau (this happened to someone else, not to me) when we were in Fairbanks. They had a real emergency coming in because you couldn't fly into Juneau on instruments. You had to fly VFR into Juneau at that time. So they had to be landing at Gus Davis and they had a plane coming in from Anchorage / Gus Davis and they couldn't get the runway lights on. If you didn't get in there in time they couldn't get these runway lights on and so finally they were talking to the operator in Juneau. I guess the weather got bad in Juneau; maybe that was it—they couldn't get in there. But anyway, the operator in Juneau couldn't get hold of the construction people in Gus Davis to tell them to try to get some lights there, and finally they got to the local broadcast station, KAUQD, I think it was, to broadcast out there and tell them to get some runway lights out there. They didn't have any runway lights, but they got out with lanterns and cars and flashlights and they lit this runway up. And so the plane got down safely.

Well, the girl who was operator there was a nurse, and later on—some years later – she was

working at a doctor's office in Fairbanks and Seattle, and there was a fellow came in there and he found out she'd been the operator in Juneau that night and he said, "You saved my life." And he told her what happened in that plane. He said that they knew they were going to crack up and the pilot finally said, "Well, this is it, folks. This is it There's no more."

[Break in audio]

This was just a little passenger plane; seven or eight passengers or something. He came down the aisle and he lay down in the aisle with his head on the floor and he said, "This is it." And somebody said—there was another passenger who was a pilot—he said, "By God, this better not be it. I'm going to see what I can do with it."

So he got up at the controls of the plane. And fortunately for him, just at that moment they started turning on all these flashlights and car lights and lanterns and whatnot and he could see the runway. But they didn't know for years later what bad actually happened. And I knew who these pilots were, too, but I didn't mention their names because we don't want that in this history. But you bear all kinds of things happening. And some of these bush pilots, I know, one of them was telling another pilot friend over the air, and he says, "Remember the time we had that trouble with that polar bear over at McGrande?" They had a polar bear in the cabin that had gotten loose.

So there were a lot more stories about Alaska, probably, than there were down here. But that's what made me get interested in it And of course through Alaska, through my work with FAA and radio work, is how I got interested in ham radio, too, because I got to know a little bit about radio. Really, that's been more of an interesting hobby to me than flying because it's one that goes on all the time.

ES: Did you help out the Army in any way during the war when you were in Alaska?

FM: Well, not as a pilot because I wasn't a pilot then. But as an operator for CAA, yes, because we had several Army people right there in the station who were security decoders, or I don't know what they were. We talked with them on the bases and the towers by interphone all the time, so we were connected with them on interphone because a lot of the flying—at Fairbanks Radio CAA station, we had the only instrument facilities there. We had the radio beam. So they all had to come in on that beam and they all had to talk to us and they all to get clearance from Airway Traffic Control, which was right in the same building that we were.

The pilots would talk to us. We would give the info to Air Traffic Control and they would give us clearance or whatever to the pilot, and I was talking about one time when I was on this broadcast frequency talking to the planes and there were several of them up there and Airway Traffic Control would clear them from one thousand to another thousand and so on, and I'd have to give them clearances, but I didn't have all of the Army planes on there. I was talking to the civilian planes. All of a sudden, this Alaska-2 came on and he said—and his exact words

were—"Ask Traffic Control what the hell's going on; I just about took the wing off a C-54 or something."

So I asked every traffic control—and it was their error—sometimes, you know, they will make errors too, because they gave a clearance to this Army plane and he was in no hurry to leave. They cleared him to leave 7,000 and he just took it to leave 7,000 but he did not say he was leaving 7,000. He was still cruising around up there, and Airway Traffic Control decided after a certain amount of time he must have left 7,000 and he cleared the Alaska-2 plane to go into 7,000. He should have waited, of course, for the Air Force to report that he had left 7,000. There was a real flap about that. Of course, that was a mistake on the part of Airway Traffic Control I was involved in it because I was the air-to-ground operator. I was typing up reports and stuff for two weeks there on that to figure out what actually had happened on it. And that was our work with the Army there. It was mostly air-to-ground.

ES: Well, I know they flew a lot of supplies and ferried planes and did all that kind of stuff in the Alaskan area.

FM: Yeah; there were a lot of planes, and the thing was we were the letdown frequency, the range frequency, the letdown procedure for Ladd Field and Weeks Field, the local little field, and Eielson Air Force Base and they had to go on that range until—and sometimes we had planes all the way up to 11,000 feet. We'd have them from 11,000 feet on down and they'd clear one out of "11," and then another one come in and so on, so that would go on for hours.

ES: They weren't too good with the oxygen in those days, if I remember.

FM: No; probably not. Don't know about that I remember flying out one time with one of those CAA planes and we didn't have oxygen, so he was checking ranges. We were getting up in some pretty high altitudes, but it was a little different than now. We had contact with a lot of the Army people and the civilian pilots. Most of this, of course, was over the air, but one time we had a little thing happen where one of these—Pan-Am and the big airlines would file flight plans from the ground as they were taxiing out so one morning there were a couple of gals sitting there in the broadcast booth and this guy came on, "I want to file a flight plan."

"Go ahead."

"Clipper 924, this is Clipper 924, DC-811 or whatever it was, Pilot So-and-so and filed his whole flight plan and when they got through one gal said to another, "Hey, Joselyn, that's the cute fellow that was here the other day, wasn't it? He can throw his shoes under my bed anytime he wants." And the pilot came on and says, "Thank you, honey."

The other one says, "Jesus Christ, did he hear that?"

He says, "I heard that, too, honey." And it was really funny. Those two girls were scared to

death. There was an open mike somewhere and they couldn't find it. There are a lot of funny things that happen. I'm just telling some of the frivolous things here just to make it kind of interesting on some of the things that did happen. I'm not saying much about my actual flying. It's more about the radio stuff.

I just got a private pilot's license, so my flying was all VFR. I didn't have an instrument rating, so I had to have good weather when I flew. But I did get around to a lot of the different states. Kind of fun to see the country at close range from a plane rather than up at 35,000 feet and recognize the roads that you have been driving on.

ES: Have you flown recently, that is, in a large commercial plane? Is that fun for you now, flying a big plane?

FM: Oh, sure. Actually, I've traveled a lot around the world; I've been in about every country in the world, I guess, and that's the way you get there, is these big planes. But it used to be more interesting to me when you'd be in a DC-3 or something and you'd fly over—you wouldn't be so high over the ground and you could see and take pictures and like that. But now these dam planes give one swoosh and they're up at 35,000 feet and you don't see much.

But I enjoy flying. The big ones where you're up at 35,000 feet, you don't see too much and you can't pick out landmarks and that type of thing. I guess a year ago I was in Indonesia, so that was a 21-hour flight, so that was a long time. We landed just briefly at Honolulu and then flew on to Indonesia, and this year I had reservations to go to Morocco on January 16, and you know what happened on January 16. Not a good day to go to Morocco because the next day they had an anti-American demonstration of 125,000 people. I didn't cancel, but the company did, of course, because the State Department said to stay out of there. So I haven't flown anywhere. People ask me where I'm going on my next trip and I say, "Catalina Island." "Swim."

ES: When you go do you fly American or do you go up to Canada and go British Air or what?

FM: Mostly by American airlines. Let's see, I don't know if I've ever flown out of Canada. I know a lot of people have. A lot of people even want to get Canadian passports because there's so much anti-American sentiment. But usually I fly with whatever is available. But I know there are a lot of people who are particular about that like the girl who was going to Morocco with me wouldn't go if we were on an American line, but we were supposed to go by Iberia, a Spanish line. Is that what you mean?

ES: Yeah; that's right. I was just wondering (inaudible) it's close, and the rates are cheaper. (Inaudible). I've heard the food is good.

FM: Well, I think one is really as good as another. I didn't have any special preference; it's just the way it turned out.

ES: I wanted to ask you, also, about your ham radio operator license now; is that something separate or did your Alaska license qualify you automatically?

FM: No; when I worked for CAA and now it's FAA, there were certain things you had to know there, quite a bit about aircraft and about navigation and meteorology because at one station we were at I had to take weather observations. But you also had to know the Code, the Morse or Continental Code, see, because a lot of that up there was not voice communication, it was dots and dashes. We collected all the weather observations by dots and dashes. It just got through better and you could do better and all the weather things came that way. That did not transfer over into amateur radio. If you wanted to get an amateur radio license—and this way it helped me, though—because I already knew the Code; I already knew something about transmitters and that kind of stuff, so it wasn't hard to get a license. Therefore, when we were in Juneau, one day I thought, "Well, I'll just go down and get—there weren't many people; there was a RI there, radio inspector, but he was not busy, so you could walk in most any day and take a test. So I just went down there and said I would like to take an amateur radio test, which was easy because it was right there. Here the closest one is Seattle, although they come to this state twice a year, or have been. So that's how I got an amateur radio license.

You have to know the Morse Code and you have to take a test. There are several. You start at novice, general class and advanced class and amateur extra class and so on. They get a little bit harder. I have amateur extra class, which is the highest one. It's not all that hard, but you have to know Code a little faster and have to know a little more of the technical stuff, which I don't know but—it's an interesting thing because you meet people all over the world by ham radio, and then in my travels around the world I've met a lot of amateur radio operators. Through that, I feel like I have a better grasp of what people really think in different places around the world.

ES: Did you ever pick up anything unexpected and something unusual?

FM: How long do you have, midnight? There are so many sides to amateur radio. You can do so many different things with it. Sometimes you just get on and talk to your friends. Sometimes some people just want to talk to faraway stations; some don't want to talk to faraway stations at all. Some just want to handle traffic, and I did that so much with CAA that I don't care about that unless it's an emergency.

People don't quite understand what happens in ham radio in these emergencies. Many times ham operators have auxiliary power. If all the power went out here, I could get out on the car on the mobile transmitter and get out to someone, see? One example was the big Alaska earthquake. People call me by phone from all over the U.S., not because there weren't ham operators around there, but they didn't know who they were, and they knew I was a ham—friends, you know. "Can you find out about my uncle, my grandmother, my grandchild, my son, my so on?"

As soon as this happened, I got on a frequency where there was someone right in Anchorage. I got on, gave my call, said where I was, "If you have anything for Montana, I'll take it." I can get him in five seconds; he can't get across the runway, see, because all communications are out there, and bow in the world—you see, like if I'd say someone in Boston wants to know about his sister who lives at such and such a street, and phone number so and so, the only way he could get out there would be to send a runner out. So, I would tell him, "Well, just stand by," that the messages are coming out and "if there's anything happens I will call you," because there is no way they could call on individual people. He had no way of getting across town. The roads were broken up. There was no telephone. The only way was to send someone out with a bicycle. Maybe he could get across. And they just couldn't do that.

So that's one thing, is being interested in the tragedies or the emergencies or whatever you call them. To me the DX was interesting, talking to people around the world. Here's one example of overseas travel. A lot of times it'd be like about the person in Australia—I was telling you about him—who called here because he couldn't get on the air now. Many times on our travels sometimes you'd get acquainted with a ham operator you hadn't seen before. It's a great fraternity even if you haven't talked to him, he's a friend because he's a ham.

We were in Damascus and I had never talked to anyone in Syria. I think at that time there were only six operators in all of Syria. I had never talked to any of them. Pat, my girlfriend and I were sitting down in the hotel lobby talking to different people. There was a fellow there who was a TV engineer and I said, "Are you a ham?" He said, "No, but I have a real good friend who is." He said, "I have to go to work right now. I'm going to call him, and he'll give you a call." People always said, "Be sure you can outrun those Arabs." This fellow called and he gave us his name and he was a ham radio operator; he would like to meet us; he will come down and pick us up and he would take us out to his home. And we went out there and we had a really enjoyable time. I don't know how many wives he had, but we met one of them. He had other people there, and we were in a Moslem home, which was most interesting. A lot of people don't have access to that. In Russia, I got into a lot of homes that I never would have otherwise in that area if it hadn't been for that ham radios.

But on this fellow, I was going to tell you what happened then later on him, his call was YKIAA. I got back here. A few months later I heard someone from India talking to YKIAA and I quickly tuned up on that frequency. My friend, my friend Rashid, I got to get him. By that time, everyone in the world had found him. He'd say, "My name is Ramid. I'm in Damascus."

I said, "Ramid. Ramid, that's not my friend whose name was Rashid." So I got him fairly early. I told him who I was, "This is Flo from Montana. How are you Rashid?" "Fine business, old man," he says. This is in code: "FBOM, my name is Rashid; I'm in Damascus." So everybody else was calling him. I knew that was him. There aren't that many YL operators going through Damascus that he wouldn't remember Flo from Montana. So I told all the rest of them, I said, "Look, guys; back off. He's a bootlegger. He's not in Damascus." They said, "Ah, Flo. Go soak your head. You talked to him; we want to talk to him."

Someone from Stockholm, Sweden called me and he said, "Go down to Band 10. You're absolutely right" He got me off to myself. He said, "You're absolutely right. That fellow is not in Damascus. He's in England or in Western France, " because he had a rotary beam that he could tell, and the signal should have come in from this direction, from Damascus, but the (inaudible) signal was coming in from England and the rest of these guys were trying to get him, you know. So I wrote to him. He had 1,800 and some people send him QSL cards and he said I wasn't even on the air. So he said "I answered every one of them." Can you imagine that? That's the kind of a guy he was. I could talk a lot longer about ham radio than I could about flying.

ES: I'm just interested in what interests you. That's fascinating; I haven't talked to any other Montana women ham operators either.

FM: Well, let's see. I can't think of any others who are pilots. Of course, there are mostly men in ham radio, too, as there are in aviation; but there are some gals in Montana who are; there are quite a few women operators but I can't think of any who are women ham operators and also women pilots.

ES: Isn't it very expensive to get all that equipment together? Your ham radio equipment?

FM: Yes and no. Some people who really know how to build things go out to a junkpile and pick up this-that, this-that, this-that and put it together and they have a little transmitter. I never got interested in that, so I bought things. But yes, to buy the commercial gear it is expensive. I'll show you my station after a while if you want to see it.

ES: Oh, I'd love to see it

FM: The gear now is rather expensive; probably most hams have several thousand dollars in it or more.

ES: I noticed that most electronics equipment, you know, you get the catalogs from the companies, and even before you get the catalog, whatever it is is obsolete. They're making it so fast so much fine-tuned to do all these things and I think one of the catalogs, I guess, he was selling out his telephones because obviously no one could run the damn thing. It did everything from answer your call and tell you what time to get up and go to bed and play the radio and acted as a minor computer, et cetera, et cetera. You need a degree just to answer the phone.

FM: That's right. All that stuff is getting so computerized and so technical and so Japanese because most of it 's coming from Japan, but that's the way with a lot of this radio equipment; it gets obsolete in a short time. You want to buy something else, it's worse than buying a new car.

ES: Do you talk to anybody in Japan?

FM: Oh, yeah; there are lots and lots of Japanese operators. Some of them know English. A lot of it is they want to contact a lot of states and a lot of countries, and they get awards for what they call W-A-S, "worked all states," so I enjoy a certain popularity, not for any personal attributes but because I'm a girl operator in Montana. So I get on the air and talk to one Japanese guy and there are 15 others backed up behind him who want to talk to that girl in Montana. So what do you talk about? They just want to make a contact; they tell you his name and where he is and please QSL; I need Montana. I don't like that kind of operating because I have to make out a bunch of QSL cards afterwards. I'd rather talk to people and find out a little bit about the country and sometimes you can do that because most of these people will speak English and if they don't speak English at all there's a system of cue-signals by which you can carry on a limited conversation.

ES: Sort of an international language; the equivalent of sign language?

FM: Right. But it's limited; they don't have too much stuff on it, mostly like your name and your location, how you copy them.

ES: So we've managed to develop two languages.

FM: I learned sign language once too just because I wanted something to learn. But it's not as comprehensive as sign language. It's more limited. If you really know sign language—I'm amazed at seeing them on TV there and how fast they can go on that stuff. But this cue-signal, it's very limited. There aren't too many things you can say. And a lot of countries will not permit what they call "third-party traffic." They don't want their operators talking or passing messages and so on, not for security reasons so much as economical reasons or financial reasons, because, like, France is a bad one, because the government has all the communications. If someone in France sends a message over here to their daughter, they figure that's taking revenue away from their telephone company. So a lot of it is that more than—that is why a lot of these countries don't want you to have someone else talking on their radio. A lot of people think it's for security reasons, you know, but it's not that. Actually, the Russians can talk more than the French, I think.

ES: I'm surprised that they are open enough to let that many people be ham operators in Russia. We think of them as a closed society and as not having the ability to communicate the way we do; and yet you say there's more over there.

FM: Yeah; Japan and Russia both. When I was in Russia, I met quite a few of the hams and I was in their homes. They're not as bad off as we think. They had anything we had with the exception of refrigeration. Most of them did not have a refrigerator. But otherwise, they had everything. I think a lot of this is a training measure to get them to learn Code because the Russian government apparently all along has encouraged ham radio operation.

ES: What part of Russia did you get into?

FM: I was there twice. The first time I was just in Leningrad and Moscow and was there (inaudible). The next time I went from London on the train to Hong Kong. We stopped in Moscow several times. That was quite interesting because I went to see a family that I had seen ten years before to see how much they had changed and everything. It's a real nice feeling to feel I've got friends in Moscow, real friends. I could see how the kids had changed and grown up and all that kind of thing. I went across Siberia. We didn't stop at many places over there. About the only place we stopped for several days of Irkutsk and then we went down to Ulan Batur and Mongolia.

ES: That's a trip I want to take. I hear you have to take your time though.

FM: No. That train that left Moscow was the most luxurious train I've ever been in. We had a real, real nice compartment. When we got into China, it wasn't so good. It was pretty crowded. But the trans-Siberian Express was really very nice, and the food was alright. Can't remember that it was specially good or specially bad. I don't pay much attention to food. I eat to live; I don't live to eat I was too busy watching out the windows. By all means, take it. It was in 1984.

[End of audio]