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Interviewee: Carol Fraser

Interviewer: Eloise Sagmiller

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Carol Fraser: My name is Carol Fraser and I was born in Lewistown and I've lived here all my life, except I have lived in the country, like out by Roy, then moved back to Lewistown and my husband came here to practice medicine and that's where I met him, so we were married here and we did spend some time in the service after that. He was in the Air Force as a doctor, not a pilot. We had to come back to Lewistown. That's where my family is.

I guess it was in 1965 that I got my pilot's license, so it was '64 that I started flying. I started because my husband had gotten his license a year or so before and everybody thought I should at least learn to land the plane for safety. I wasn't very interested in airplanes. I was kind of afraid of them. They took me out and I was hooked! From then on, I was a more avid pilot than my husband was. Once the other girls started flying, we went to 99th meetings just in Montana.

We were in two races. One of them started in Glasgow and ended up in Lewistown so all the festivities were in Lewistown and the girl that went with me was a nonpilot. She was a friend and a good navigator so she enjoyed it and then the only other race I was in started in Bozeman. Joan Orley was the pilot and I was the copilot and it ended in Pocatello, Idaho. Those were the only two races I was ever in. They were just fun races.

Eloise Sagmiller: What kind of a plane were you flying?

CF: When I flew, our plane was a Piper Comanche 250. My daughter says I can't remember old telephone numbers or anything, but I remember 8236-Papa. Joan flew a Bonanza. I started taking lessons in the Comanche and then they wouldn't let you take lessons or solo in it until you had so many hours because it is a bigger plane so I did end up taking lessons then in the Tri-Pacer. It was owned by the school that I went to. Then after so many hours in that I went back to the Comanche and that's what I always flew then.

ES: Do any of your children fly?

CF: No, they don't. I think all of them would like to have, but with so many things they were involved in, and then when they were on their own they couldn't afford to. But while we were paying the bills, they were always involved in sports and school and other things, so none of the kids did learn to fly. They all loved it, though, and my youngest son was about three when I took my lessons and he went with me all over, almost any place we went and he used to always want me to fly through the clouds on the top of the mountain. I wasn't a mountain flyer but he just thought that was so pretty. But most of my kids seemed to just get in an airplane and fall asleep, it was so relaxing to them. And really just flying for pleasure is what I did except for

taking kids to their eye appointments in Billings or sometimes when Joe would have X-rays, I'd fly them as an excuse to get to fly other than looking at the Jakes and things around here. It was strictly pleasure and I just didn't go any further than my private pilot license.

ES: Who was your instructor?

CF: Bob Simpson and his wife Avis is still my real good friend that I was telling you is taking calligraphy from Margaret [Goldhahn?]. I'm sure that she's, at least it sounds like it, from Utica Village, Sapphire Village, and she's still my friend, and he was a very good friend. I always felt that if he wasn't calm and quiet and kind that I might not have flown because he really was patient and made it real easy to fly.

ES: Even learning to drive a car that's important to have someone calm and patient.

CF: And he really was especially good, I thought.

ES: Does he still—

CF: No, he doesn't. He was an instructor and a spray pilot and everything and he got out of the whole thing ten or fifteen years ago. Doesn't fly at all. I think he runs a sign company here in town. That's who Joan took from, and Madonna [Smith]. I think Flo [Florence "Flo" Majerus] took from a different instructor. But most of the women took from Bob.

ES: They had a real active Air Force unit here.

CF: Oh, we did have at that time. All the men and our husbands were flying and a lot of the women and the Aviation Club was real active and it's just all kind of died. Well, the price of gas, I think for one thing, you couldn't justify just flying around looking at Jakes. The reason that Joe and I quit flying was that we owned our airplane with two other doctors in the building and it was ready for a \$10,000 checkup or overhaul and that was expensive. Everybody had kind of quit by then, so they felt they would sell the plane. And we sold it to the man at the airport and they used it for an ambulance plane. I think they still have it up there. So we always could, if we wanted to, lease the same plane that we'd learned in. But we haven't done it. When my husband sees the plane he always says, "Do you have any desire to fly?" and I really don't. I just loved it at the time. I know I'd have to start all over again. But he has the desire still, he says. He might sometime.

ES: Have you ever flown in a small plane before, like when you were a child?

CF: No, I really don't remember. I remember when we lived at Roy a plane had crashed in the middle of town in another little tiny town and I remember my dad taking us over to look at that. That always scared me of little airplanes. When they told me I had to land the airplane I wasn't very thrilled about it until I got up and then it was fun. We had a lot of good times. We had a lot

of nice people in the 99s. The thing I think that had always surprised me the most was you think all lady pilots are going to look alike and the first 99 meeting I went to everybody looked different. We always had to wear skirts. We couldn't wear slacks to 99s meetings.

ES: I wonder if Jacqueline Cochran had anything to do with that in that she had the original 99s during the Second World War.

CF: Maybe she did. They were probably trying to get away from a mannish image of a pilot, trying to show that it can be feminine too. We didn't have to wear goggles and scarves and all that part of it, but we did have to wear skirts. We had our 99 buttons. We did fly places that we probably wouldn't have flown just on our own. We didn't have any reason to fly some of the places where we had our meetings, and that made it nice, to see more area. I can remember driving to Great Falls to a 99s meeting even when you couldn't fly.

ES: You can get weathered in in Montana real easy.

CF: Yes, you can and we used to fly into Billings, my husband and kids, and we finally decided that if we wanted to spend the day shopping and not watch the sky, we're better off to drive. So many times we would go and not even finish what we intended to do because it would start looking bad and we were very cautious pilots. I was a blue sky and sunshine pilot I was just doing it for the fun of it and I wouldn't take a chance at all. My mother died when I was 16 and I didn't want to leave my children. I was really especially careful. We started once to one of my brothers' weddings in North Dakota and got as far as Miles City and came back. We always came back if there was any doubt about it. Can't gamble on weather. I hear of too many that do.

ES: Did your local organization have anything to do with the development of the airport here in Lewistown?

CF: Not as far as the women went. The men, I think, did. The airport commission and everything.

ES: Were they (women) on the airport commission or proceeded to move into that, do you think, because of interest?

CF: I imagine it got more active because of interest. And we still have it, they are still the ones that try to keep the Big Sky coming in and have done well on that. At one time I was on the airport—not the commission but for the Chamber of Commerce and that was interesting because you knew what was going on up there more than you would otherwise.

ES: It was good having the women represented.

CF: Yes, it was. That's why they wanted a 99s on it and I can't remember—I'm sure others were on it too, but I don't remember right now.

ES: Do you know if a local 99s is in existence right now?

CF: There isn't in Lewistown, I know. No one flies. Whether the state has died out or not, Flo kind of thought it had, state-wide. Have you talked to anyone else who has mentioned...?

ES: Really no. I talked to Vivienne Schrank yesterday. She seemed real vague about it, and I don't think she really knew of any 99s.

CF: We used to get writeups in the papers or you'd see it in the Great Falls paper or the Billings paper about the meetings and I just haven't seen anything. I think it kind of went by the wayside, maybe as far as the state—

ES: A nice outlet for the women.

CF: It really was.

ES: I have to ask you questions because I don't know anything about flying. Things like personal insurance, did that go up in recent years if you wanted to fly and your life insurance said, "What do you do?"

"Well, I fly."

CF: You know, I don't even remember about that at all. I know you did have different insurance when you were flying. A lot of things changed because aviation made stricter rules. You had to have more different things on your plane. I can't even think what they are, I haven't used the terms for so long, for safety. [inaudible] It did seem they put a lot of restrictions on private flying. They still do. But I can see a reason for it too, probably. Not in our area as much as in the city you often hear of private planes colliding with the commercial.

ES: Pure traffic.

CF: That's right, the traffic. I said, "I would never have learned to fly if I hadn't lived in Lewistown," with such a nice airport and the men at FAA were so nice and understanding, especially to women. Several spoke especially plainly to us and of course it's so wide open up there. I wouldn't even have learned in Billings or Great Falls because the airbase at Malmstrom, the traffic, I've flown in there after I did learn to fly but I don't think I would have taken lessons up there.

ES: Before I leave town, I'm going to go out and photograph the airport here. I should have photographed the one in Jordan. It must be very tiny.

CF: It is small. On one of our air races we started at Glasgow and landed at Jordan. That's the only time I've been at theirs. It's a small country airport. We have a nice airport because we were an abandoned airbase from World War II. Really nice runways up there. A lot of them. There are some closed runways too but it's a nice airport up there. I guess we still have flight service but I don't know if we're going to continue to have it or not. They're trying to stop it in so many places.

ES: I hope not.

CF: Me too. I think for safety they definitely should.

ES: Just getting around Montana.

CF: When we flew anyplace that had flight service was so much easier. They have a unicorn that you can call in and they can give you a little bit of instruction, but it doesn't give what flight service does. It's a beautiful view from up there. It's a pretty place and at the time that we took lessons they had the restaurant up there so that was always nice to meet up there at the restaurant for coffee and talk over flying. A lot of people have tried to open it since and it hasn't been successful.

ES: That's a shame.

CF: It is, because it's such a nice location for it.

ES: Used to be a lot of fun to go up and watch the small planes take off and land.

CF: That's right. I think that's when my husband started taking. He just hung around the airport a lot and watched the others and talked. He'd been in the Air Force but not in the flying part of it. One day he didn't come home. I had calls for him. I couldn't find him. I thought, I'm going to call the airport. He was there. I had a feeling. They said, "I'll have him call you." That was the day he took his first lesson. He didn't tell me he was going to take a lesson. He sneaked up there and did it.

CF: But when we were in the service in Colorado Springs where we were stationed once, we lived in a little tiny trailer 19 feet long which our motor home was bigger than that. I had a baby. So we spent a lot of time just riding around the country. You'd eat dinner and you'd leave every evening because it was warm in the trailer and we always went to the airport and watched the planes. I knew someday he would have to get a plane and fly, but I didn't think I would.

ES: What about this Comanche airplane? Where were the wings? Were they on the top or on the bottom?

CF: They had the low wings.

ES: Yours were on the bottom then.

CF: M'h'm.

ES: I've had a couple who were on the top.

CF: The [inaudible] but the Comanches had the low wings. I can show you [inaudible].

ES: That's a beautiful plane.

CF: It was a really nice plane. We had a lot of happy hours in it.

ES: Did you ever participate in a race that was planned with your husband?

CF: No. I don't know if there might have been, but ours were just strictly ladies' races.

ES: And you and Flo teamed up together?

ES: No. It was Joan and I, once. And then like you said the first race, it was just a friend and I; it wasn't even a pilot. I think they would rather have had another pilot, but she had flown with me a lot to Billings and Great Falls and I knew she was a good navigator and kept her head good and didn't get excited, so I felt safe because at that time it seemed like each pilot wanted to fly their own plane; they didn't want to be a copilot especially. But the one time I was a copilot with Joan and she flew. She was the only one—as copilot—that ever went into Powder Puff. I think she went with Karen Ribbi. Pearl said she mentioned her to you. She lives at Hamilton or...she was a real active pilot.

ES: She lives so close to me. I could zip up there.

CF: Joan could probably tell you and I'm not sure it was Karen she was copilot with or another girl from over there. There were several of them who were real active. I'm sure Joan would know their names.

ES: What did you call your races? You didn't call them Powder Puff Derbies then. I mean interstate.

CF: They were just 99s. They were just fun races. Just to give you clues to which airports you're going to go to. Once we landed at Roundup in that one race and they must have described it as something to do with roundup and cattle and just gave clues like that so you could find your airport. We always got to the right one. At one place they had us throw darts, so it wasn't all

pertaining to flying, it was the fun things too. But then we did have some kinds of hard quizzes on flying too, on navigation mostly and the regulations too, and weather. Those are the three things that you really are strong on. I took meteorology in the flight school. That's when I really got interested in weather; I never paid that much attention before and now I watch clouds and pay much more attention to the weather and that's more interesting to me since then.

ES: It's amazing how taking a class in something can just alert you to it.

CF: Before you didn't pay that much attention to the types of clouds or fronts or anything but now it's fun to keep up with it. Shortly after I took that my son was having a hard time with a class at school, general science or something, but meteorology was the part they were studying, and it was fun teaching him and helping him with it because it was fresh in my mind too.

ES: He must have thought you were brilliant.

CF: He probably did, and I wouldn't have known it a month before. Mom knew something anyway.

ES: Do you remember your first flying lesson?

CF: I really don't remember the first one. I think it was a Friday the 13 in October, so I was really hesitant to go. I do kind of have a fear of heights, although planes don't bother me or gondolas or things like that, but getting on this roof and helping roof really bothered me. But one thing my instructor used to always get after me when I was first flying was when you bank, I'd pull away from it. He said, "Lean with it, don't pull away from it." I just had this kind of fear of turning. I just had a very patient instructor, and he felt women were good pilots because they had a soft touch on the controls and everything, so he was very nice about those lady pilots, which helped.

ES: I know I see a lot of women working big equipment anymore.

CF: I know it!

ES: It's that same thing, that soft touch.

CF: It might be. I know when we were in Canada, we'd look up and way up here would be a lady dragging that huge equipment. You always think of them *as* being kind of delicate but it's probably the same thing, knowing the touch and not getting too excited, staying calm. They seem to do a good job or they wouldn't hire them.

ES: Did you ever hold office in the 99s?

CF: No, I didn't. Well, maybe in our local one. We probably all had to but as far as state I never did hold an office. I never cared for that part of it; I never have in the auxiliary statewide either. I'm glad someone else will do it, because I really didn't like that part of it at all.

ES: Do you and your husband still ski?

CF: That's cross-country. We did downhill ski and that's when we used to fly to Red Lodge and Big Mountain; we got a lot of use out of the plane then, but then we went into cross-country. I had a ruptured disk ten years ago; that's when I quit downhill skiing. But I love cross-country better anyway. In fact my daughter and granddaughter and I went up in the mountains Sunday.

There is never as much snow up there. But Joe does cross-country too, but I usually go with my sister and her husband or my daughter. I probably went for the last time this year. Not that there isn't enough snow, but you've got to get on with your yard work and other things like that. All the ski runs closed just at the time we got this last snow. I think they pay their insurance to the middle of April, and if you get more insurance it isn't worth it, and then if they're on government land, their lease is in then too. The ski run Kevin works at in Idaho is private but they still close just because of insurance.

ES: Do most ski runs maintain an airport so you can fly in?

CF: Not right at, like, Red Lodge. It's north of the town of Red Lodge. But there are several businessmen that will let you take their cars up too, let you eat your dinners there and things, but I remember this. He ran a restaurant and he'd come to the airport in his Thunderbird and then let us take it on up to the ski run. Business promoting. At Big Mountain I can't remember. I think we rented the car from the airport there. It wasn't at Big Mountain, it was at Whitefish. They kind of catered to them. Because quite a few people do fly in a lot of places and ski too. It's a long drive and a short flight.

ES: Did you ever use your plane? I suppose you weren't in a roundup with it. But did you check cattle or feed or anything like that?

CF: No, we didn't. People in the country further out do but we didn't have that many anyway and this is right up here and this is right up here. We never did use it that way at all. But the ranchers do. They used them for coyote hunting.

ES: How about the horse shows?

CF: Yes, we did fly to horse shows if we were just watching them but a lot of time if the kids were in them, you pulled a horse trailer. But if we took the plane it would be to go look at horses or to a horse auction like in South Dakota or Nebraska or someplace. Then if you bought something you had to come back home, get the trailer and truck and pick it up.

ES: Was there a particular breed of horse that you were interested in?

CF: Quarter-horse. My husband and his - our oldest son down the creek raise quarter-horses. We're horse poor. Still keep adding more. At times you sell most of them away from the area. They think if they go someplace else, they can get a better horse. So the others come here and buy ours and the local people go someplace else and buy, although we've sold around here too. And they enjoy them themselves, you know. It's better than when he was riding bulls, anyway.

ES: I don't think I could see that either.

CF: I never cared a lot for rodeos anyway. I liked the roping part and that, but not the riding events. And then when he started riding bulls, I just couldn't stand it. And the fairgrounds is just over the hill there. I could hear them. He was never seriously hurt. He had a ruptured spleen once, and a broken arm, but luckily quit in time, so I'm glad he isn't interested now. Horses and raising cattle. They give you gray hairs. Now my son who works at the ski run, skiing's no fun anymore, so he snowboards and that's a lot wilder than skiing is. I think that's why he likes it.

ES: It looks like surfing.

CF: It is, and jumping way up. Of course, you don't have poles. I always felt my poles gave me balance, and I depended on them. Without poles, we saw him. He's been in several races at Missoula and in Kellogg and did real well, so we got to see him race. It's scary. And you think of the injuries, but you can't tell him. He's 29. I never could tell him before he was 29. He's not married, so I guess it's time to have that kind of fun.

ES: Well, they will do it; they will do it. Most of the questions that I started to ask were more ancient history than flying [inaudible].

CF: When we went to some of the 99s meetings it was surprising some of the ones that have really been up a long time. Someone outside of Billings; I can't remember what her name was. Did anyone ever give you a name for someone?

ES: [inaudible]

CF: Oh, I remember her name. She was from Great Falls, wasn't she?

ES: I think so. Louise Butcher. From Winifred.

CF: Oh, out the Winifred area.

ES: She was older when she went into flying.

CF: I think she was too because her husband has flown. Then she went into it. And I imagine

that's who you'd find who did check cattle by plane, her family.

ES: Right. She isn't home yet.

CF: Is she south, or—

ES: Yeah. She's in Arizona. Evidently has her mail forwarded. She called me from Arizona and said, "Well, I'm not home yet. I'll be home in May sometime, so I'll have to come back.

CF: What are you writing this up for? "Montana History"?

ES: It's part of a Montana History project.

[End of Audio]