

BILLY PETERSON

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota



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TRANSCRIPT – BILLY PETERSON

Interviewee: Billy Peterson
Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
Interview Date: January 14, 2025
Location: Oxford Community Center, Saint Paul, Minnesota
Length: 01:40:43

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Tuesday, January 14, 2025, and I'm here at Oxford with Billy Peterson. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I'll be talking to Billy about his very lengthy and significant involvement at Oxford, almost from the very beginning of its existence. Billy, I can't thank you enough for being part of this project. I so appreciate your willingness to sit down for an interview, as well as all the help you've been providing in helping to shape the project. So I'm very grateful for your time.

Billy Peterson: Great.

KH: Okay, so as I said, I'm just going to start and ask you a question. You can answer very briefly, because we'll talk about it in more detail as we go here. I know this is going to be hard work for you, but what is your connection, or connections, to Oxford?

BP: Well, just saying my connection, what it is, gives me three years that I'd like to remember: 1940, 1960, 1950. 1940, I was born. 1950, I started what I considered to be my journey to Oxford. There was no Oxford in 1950, so it's just a thing of what prepared me for the 1960 date of when I actually started physically with the New Oxford playground.

[00:01:52]

KH: And then, so you started here when it was just a playground in 1960. How many years roughly, have you been involved, or were you involved at Oxford, whether through the parks department, coaching, officiating, mentoring?

BP: Before Oxford?

KH: Total of years at Oxford. Like, you started in 1960. I mean, are you still connected to Oxford?

BP: I'm connected. In fact, I consider 1960 as kind of like me being reborn, because everything in my life is connected to Oxford in the last 60 years. There isn't a day [that] goes by that somebody doesn't recognize me because of Oxford, or that they saw me coach, or they saw me do something, but it's all connected to Oxford.

KH: So given that and your deep history here, we really can't separate you from Oxford or vice versa. And I know you've been interviewed and honored and written about and acknowledged in so many places for so much of the work you have done, largely at Oxford or through Oxford. I just want to acknowledge that we have about two hours to talk today, maybe a little bit less, so we're probably just going to be able to scratch the surface. But we'll do what we can do and then if we need to do a second interview, if you want to do that, we can do that. But I do want to just acknowledge right at the beginning that even as I was preparing for this interview, I thought, how am I going to prepare for this conversation when you have such a long and deep history. So we're just going to give it a go, and see what comes out.

BP: Okay. [Laughs.]

KH: All right, so here we go. Question for you is, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background and your family? Where you grew up?

[00:03:54]

BP: Okay, I was born in 1940 in Mora, Minnesota. The first 10 years of my life are just a real mix up. I don't know anything from it, very little, and very little background of my parents, except the fact that their parents came over from Sweden and Czechoslovakia. So I guess if you're reading or watching TV, they're called immigrants. So I'm from an immigrant background. That's kind of a joke.

KH: How many kids were there in your family?

BP: In my family? I have two sisters.

KH: Okay, and are they older than you? Younger? Are you in the middle?

BP: One is 19 years younger. One is two years older.

KH: Okay, so you're the middle child.

BP: I guess you'd call it that.

KH: [Laughs.] Okay. And you were just telling me, before we started the official interview, that your dad worked for the Census Bureau.

BP: That's what moved us around so much my first 10 years. It's when we came back from Washington, D.C., is when I started to become involved with all these things. In fact, we came back, my dad was still with the Census Bureau, so he worked downtown St. Paul, and we started out coming back from Washington D.C. and Minneapolis. Then in 1950 we moved to the east side of St. Paul. And the east side of St. Paul is where I actually started my life with parks and recreation. That's where I actually started what I call my journey to getting to Oxford.

KH: And how so? What happened on the east side?

[00:05:51]

BP: Well, we had just moved to the east side. I befriended a few kids. They took me to

Hazel Park playground. It was at Hazel Park playground [that] was the first time I played on a team, played baseball, played basketball, and played football. Now, that was the first year that we moved out there. My second year, I played baseball. I didn't play basketball anymore. I played hockey. And hockey is a big word in my life, and a big word and reason that I got to Oxford. I'll relay that later on. But what happened was, I was a catcher in baseball, and they said, "Hey, we need somebody on our hockey team that can play goalie." And I said, "Well, I've never been on skates before." They said, "Well, that doesn't matter. When you're a goalie, you don't have to skate too much, just a little moving back and forth. But because of your catching, you could be a goalie."

KH: Similar position.

BP: Right. What ended up being the reason I ended up at Oxford, is through hockey. So that was a great moment in my life, when I played hockey. I didn't realize it, of course. Nothing you do preparing you for life you know at the time that it's happening.

KH: And so you were 10, 11 years old around this time?

BP: In 1950 I was 10, and that's why I used that term of 1940, I was born, 1950 was this journey to Oxford, because the athletic part was part of the journey, my first exposure to parks and recreation. In fact, also, and this will come later on, but my coach and the Director of Hazel Park playground was Norm Lyght. Norm Lyght was a Black man. That's my first exposure to an African American in my life, and later on in my life has been filled with interracial friends.

[00:08:16]

KH: Yeah, so at the time you were living on the east side, what do you recall about the neighborhood? Was it mostly white people over there? Was it relatively diverse? Like, what was the—

BP: No, it was a white neighborhood. Almost exclusively. That's why Norm Lyght being there was really something. It was unusual. And another thing that helped me along the way was, the team that I was on—Norm Lyght was the coach in basketball—we won the city championship. When I played hockey out there, the second year we played hockey, we won the city championship. But the second year, I was not living on the east side. My parents split up. My mother stayed on the east side. My dad came into the Rondo neighborhood. 1952, I was in the Rondo neighborhood, but I still had a love for hockey, but there was no hockey in the Rondo neighborhood. Rondo neighborhood, of course, was where largely the population of African Americans lived. I still wanted to play hockey, so I went back to Hazel Park every day. My father was now, not only [with] the Census Bureau, but he was also a traveling salesman, so he was not home during the week very much. My mother didn't drive, so we didn't have another car. So I took the streetcar, not the bus, but the streetcar was one block from where we had moved in the Rondo neighborhood on Selby Avenue. I took the streetcar three or four times a week to Hazel Park for practice or games and back.

KH: And that would have been after school, weekends?

BP: Yep.

KH: So you had long days.

BP: I what?

KH: You had a long day as a kid going to school—

BP: Oh, yeah.

[00:10:16]

KH: —taking the streetcar, going to practice and play, and then taking the streetcar back.

BP: But looking back, hockey was so important, and I'll come to that later on, how it became important in my history. And I never would have been at Oxford without hockey.

KH: And what did you like about hockey? Once you started playing it, once they recruited you from the baseball team to play hockey, what did you like about the sport?

BP: I don't know, maybe because I was good. [Laughs.]

KH: [Laughs] That helps.

BP: Although I felt that I was good in all the sports, but hockey was so new to me, and I don't know. It's a good question, but I did enjoy it.

KH: And so, kind of stepping back to a bigger question, whether it's hockey or basketball or baseball, I know you're so intimately tied to baseball, what is it about sports in general for you as a kid that you found appealing?

[00:11:52]

BP: I really don't know. In reflecting back, you know, I kind of think it was because I never did it before. So my first exposure to it, and my first exposure to friendships with other kids, because my first 10 years was so screwy. You know, I had no friends. This was the first time I ever had friends. So that enjoyment of friends and playing together and being successful, too. A couple of things that happened at Hazel Park. The first year that I played basketball, we won a city championship with Norm Lyght as our coach. The second year that I played hockey out there, when I was traveling, we won a city championship. So for some reason, today, we take pictures of all our teams. For some reason, I have pictures of those two teams. A picture is worth 1000 words, but a team picture isn't worth anything if it doesn't have the names of the teams. So one of the things that I have done, which this is on my road to being successful at Oxford, was putting names to all the teams that I had coached. And I've got those. That's with that P.O.P., the

thing I sent you, the PowerPoints, got names on all the teams.

KH: That's amazing. You must have coached over the span of your career, thousands—

BP: Well, thousands of kids. If you figure I coached for 60 years, and some of those years, it was multiple teams that I coached, and at least one coach, one year, every year. So I would say hundreds, hundreds of teams. Not thousands, but hundreds.

KH: Hundreds of teams, consisting of—anyway—

BP: Thousands of kids.

KH: Lots of—

BP: Lots of kids.

KH: Kids. Yeah.

BP: And I think another wonderful thing about that is, the greatest friends that I have today are the great friends that I had when I first started at Oxford. The ones that I got from coaching and playing with. They're still my best friends today. I'm so blessed.

KH: So kind of going back to something you said a few minutes ago. Do you know why it was that your dad decided to move to the Rondo neighborhood?

[00:14:08]

BP: To the Rondo neighborhood?

KH: Like, why Rondo?

BP: I have no clue. I'm sure he didn't understand Rondo at the time, which I didn't either, because I lived there but didn't understand it. Probably didn't even understand that it was basically in the Black community, but just knowing it was a place to live, I think that's what it was. Because we rented a place.

KH: And you said it was on Selby.

BP: It was a block off of Selby, on Dayton.

KH: Okay.

BP: In fact, later on, a couple years later, when my parents got back together, we moved two blocks down to Dale and Dayton, so we're still in that Rondo neighborhood, and I went to Central High School.

KH: Okay. So yeah, I would like to talk just for a couple minutes about the neighborhood when you got here, when you were a kid. When you were growing up here in 1952 and on, were most of your neighbors African American at that time?

BP: I don't even know, to be honest, because I never even thought about it. But I do know that when I first moved with my dad to there, the first thing I did was enroll at Marshall Junior Senior High. It was a junior senior high at that time. And I was in the eighth grade, and that's where I first met one of my better friends, named Pettiford, was the last name. Wally Pookie Pettiford became one of my best friends, which also meant that I became best friends with his entire family.

[00:16:02]

KH: It was a big family. Was it a big family?

BP: Well, it was pretty big, but not real big but it was big enough for me to be involved with them, and them be in this journey to Oxford. Very important, very important journey to Oxford.

KH: And I know, let's see. I'm going to have to review the generations with you. What was Wally or Pookie's Dad's name?

BP: John Pettiford.

KH: John Pettiford, and we'll come to him—

BP: Oh yes, because in my life, the phone call that I got from him was the phone call of my life. Changed my life.

KH: And we will definitely talk about that. Okay, so there's John Pettiford, and then Wally, or Pookie, who else was the children of John and his wife, siblings of Wally?

BP: Well, he had a couple. In fact, one of my kids that played for me, David Pettiford, was on that hockey team, that all Black hockey team.

KH: Okay, so was he Wally's brother?

BP: Brother.

KH: Okay, okay.

BP: It wasn't a large family, but it was a very good family, very neat family, and took me right in as a friendship.

KH: So you didn't feel, you don't recall feeling that being an issue?

BP: Yeah, I didn't know anything about race and the pros and the cons, or whatever. Just was never involved in it.

KH: Because this is what, the 50s, mid-50s. Yeah, so Rondo is still a thriving community.

BP: Still Rondo. Yeah.

KH: Even though there are all the discussions now about I-94 coming through, which it eventually does, as we all know.

[00:18:02]

BP: And that was a big factor in Oxford being built. I-94 coming through.

KH: Yeah, and the '50s, and we'll talk about that as well, the 50s is also, just nationally, there's this increasing attention to race, to racism. The post-war period of the Civil Rights Movement is starting to really become prominent nationally, particularly in the South. But for

you, as a kid, growing up in Rondo, you didn't get a sense of race being an issue for you and the people you were growing up with?

BP: Well, I never grew up in an area where it was an issue. And the first time I knew there was an issue was after I had gotten these new friends, the Pettifords and probably my best friend for life, Duane Perteet, there's another family in the neighborhood. But for some reason, I hooked on with those guys as friendships. So a lot of my friendships became African Americans, and I had no clue what they were going through initially. Then the more that I was involved with them, then I sort of understood a little bit. But even then, I was oblivious to it. It didn't seem to affect my life in any way. In fact, going into my life at Oxford, it was a factor why I was so accepted as a white man in basically a Black neighborhood and a Black group of kids coming to Oxford playground. In fact, here's a fun one. One of our chiefs who has retired, Chief Finney, at a Martin Luther King Day event, he was one of the guest speakers, and he ended up talking a little bit about Oxford. For some reason, I don't remember why it went that way. Although he was a participant, he said, "You know, for two years, I didn't know that Bill Peterson was white. I was there for two years before I knew he was white." So that was him saying the way I handled myself and everything, it wasn't like I was somebody that didn't belong. So that's another issue of why I was so accepted, right off the bat at Oxford, was because I was from the neighborhood.

[00:20:56]

KH: That had to have been really important. And I think our planning team, you and Frank and Lisa and I talked about this in one of our meetings. But do you think sports, if done, practiced, coached, officiated well, can somehow build bridges between people of different races? In other words, was it your participation in sports, also with African American kids, that helped you get along in a world where race often was a divisive issue?

BP: Right.

KH: Okay, conceptual questions. Let's go back to—

BP: Well, just one thought on that. If in some way you are blessed like I was, your life moved you in that direction of being involved with Blacks, it's very beneficial in the racial theme of your life. I can understand why somebody who has never been involved has difficulty, because Blacks have never been in their life, and they're going from what they know. The only thing is what they know. So I've had a lot of guys, like, I go to Lifetime. I work out every day. And a lot of times somebody will come up to me and tell me, I played against your teams. So there is, every day, there's something that reminds me about Oxford. But they would say, "You know, we were afraid to come there. But we really appreciated having you there because it looked like everything was in control in terms of us coming there. We never had problems." So I get reinforced every day, no matter what it is, it connects back to Oxford in some way.

[00:23:11]

KH: Yeah, and the Lifetime you work out at is in what city?

BP: In Woodbury.

KH: In Woodbury. So the people who are talking to you at Woodbury and remembering their teams playing against your Oxford teams. Were they mostly suburban teams, white teams?

BP: Well, they were white teams, or white guys that was telling me that, but they weren't necessarily from Woodbury, originally. So a lot of them grew up in St. Paul or St. Paul area. One of the things that I'm known for now is the Blaze commercial, Spire commercial. And a lot of people see me on that, so they understand the Billy Peterson Field and all of that thing. So I get reminded about the Billy Peterson Field and Oxford every day. Every day of my life. In fact, it seems like every connection I have with anybody, I can always have that connection because of

Oxford. I'm married to Gwen Peterson, who was Gwen Crow at the time. Our connection started when I was at Oxford, she was in Central High School, and she was on a work program, and they applied at Oxford for her to work. So she worked for me when she was 16 years old.

[00:24:47]

KH: Everything.

BP: Right. I never grew up with religion at all, but when I was reborn at Oxford, because of some things, well, especially my wife got me involved in Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, you know. And that's in my journey, too.

KH: Wow. So yeah, I see as you're talking, how you can't separate Oxford from—

BP: From anything in my life once I turned 20.

KH: Yeah. So, let's go back then. So 1952, your family moves to Rondo. You are commuting—

BP: Half of my family.

KH: Half of your family. Did your sisters stay with your mom?

BP: Yep.

KH: Okay, so it was you and your dad.

BP: And my dad.

KH: Okay. And so you spend that time commuting on the streetcar from Rondo to Hazel Park.

BP: I only had one sister at that time.

KH: Oh, right, because the other one's not around yet because she's that much younger. Okay, well, wait a minute. I was going to say, tell me about the call that changed your life, but we have some things to talk about a little bit before that. So you go to Marshall Junior/Senior

High, and then, but you graduate from Central High School?

[00:26:13]

BP: Right. My last three years of high school were at Central.

KH: Okay.

BP: And I played goalie.

KH: Okay, so you're still playing hockey?

BP: Oh yeah.

KH: Okay.

BP: And that's why the Pettifords knew that I was a hockey player. That's the big connection. That's the big connection, which we'll see later on.

KH: Okay, is through hockey still?

BP: Well, they knew I was a hockey man, and played hockey for Central for three years. So John Pettiford, Pookie's dad, knew when he made a phone call to me. We'll get to that later.

KH: Okay. And now, you said you met Wally or Pookie at Marshall?

BP: Right.

KH: Right. Was he playing the same sports as you?

BP: No. Just a friendship.

KH: Okay. Just friends. Okay. But clearly, through that friendship, he and his family knew, obviously, that you played hockey?

BP: And his dad knew I played hockey.

KH: Okay.

BP: That's the big connection in my life—

KH: Okay—

BP: —to Oxford.

KH: So, did you play other sports at Central, also?

BP: Oh yeah.

KH: What other sports?

BP: I played, football, baseball and hockey.

KH: So you had all seasons. All seasons, sports. Was hockey your favorite of the three?

BP: Well, people always used to ask me, "What's your favorite sport?" And I said, "Well, depends upon the season." [Laughs.] The same way with my friendships. They would go, "Well, who are your best friends?" And I said, "Well, it depends upon the season." And that's what athletics did for me. It built not only relationships, but friendships, lifetime friendships.

[00:28:01]

KH: So you played three different sports, football, baseball, hockey. Do you think, if we're thinking about the sports themselves, that there are skills, or maybe it's a mindset that allows somebody like you to translate their athletic experience in one sport to another sport? I mean, it seems like now we have kids specializing in a sport so early on, I don't know, and maybe they still do play multiple sports. But how did you move between those different sports? Obviously, they're different seasons, but what about the athletic skills of those different sports? Did they translate from sport to sport?

BP: Well, they do. It transfers your physical skills. There's fundamentals of each level of play, I mean, each sport has different fundamentals. That's where we're missing in this day and age. Kids are not taught how to play. They watch TV and see how they play, and that's how they think they should play. And it's not good. The fundamentals in professional sports are not good. They're not taught. They just expect you as a physical being to play.

KH: Interesting. And did you ever do any individual sports? Or were you all team sports?

BP: Me, personally? Nope, just team sports.

KH: And I mean, I hear you've said it many times over the time we've been talking already, that sports for you built friendships and built relationships. And I would imagine that you can build those things, if you're on a team full of individuals, you know in an individual sport, the tennis team, the track team, whatever. But I would imagine that there's something uniquely bonding about playing a sport that is played as a team. You think that's fair to say?
[00:30:18]

BP: Well, they used to say there is no "I" in team, but that's gone. All you see now is at the professional level, they're beating their chests, they're pointing, they're doing this, they're doing that. The things that used to be taunting in the National Football League now are accepted. In fact, they're promoted because viewers like to see it. So the whole game on the kids level has totally changed, right with it.

KH: Has trickled down from—

BP: Trickled down, yeah.

KH: —what you see on the pro level, and filtered down.

BP: And I think it's filtered down in coaching, too, because coaches see the same thing. Youth coaches.

KH: And what year did you graduate from Central?

BP: '57. An interesting thing. I graduated when I was 16, and Duane Perteet and myself, our thoughts were always, as soon as we graduated, we're going into the Marine Corps. That was our destination. Well, as soon as we graduated, we both went down, we volunteered for the Marine Corps. They took Duane Perteet, but they didn't take me. I didn't realize that you had to

be 17 with parent's permission, or 18 on your own. So I had to wait three months until I was old enough to go in.

KH: With your parents' permission?

BP: Pardon?

KH: With your parents' permission.

BP: Yeah, with my parents' permission.

KH: They obviously gave their permission.

BP: Well, they knew all along that I wanted to go into the Marine Corps.

KH: Why? What was the appeal of the Marines to you?

[00:32:00]

BP: I guess, who knows? [Laughs.]

KH: Well, and certainly so what, that's '57. That's in an era where, you know, coming out of World War Two, and military service is very honored and very, I think, more common, certainly, than it is today.

BP: Well, Marine Corps has always been different in my eyes, for some reason, I'm not sure why. Because the old saying, it's not an old saying, but it's a saying for me, because some people ask me, "Were you in the Marines?" And I said, "No, I still am in, because once a Marine, always a Marine." So that's a cliché, and I don't know where I got that initially, but I've got it on my back in a tattoo. Once a Marine, always a Marine. It's been such an influence on me. It's in that journey, because the discipline that I was under in the Marine Corps continued to be the discipline that I used at Oxford. And that's why a lot of teams have told me that they would come to Oxford, because my teams are very disciplined, contrary to what they heard about coming into the neighborhood. Do you know how that goes?

KH: So, yeah, going back to that comment that people have made to you, that you know, "Our teams are afraid to come in to play at Oxford." Why were they afraid?

BP: The Black and white thing. Whites had had no experience with Blacks, were afraid to come in because of everything that they've ever heard or seen, but not everything that they've ever experienced. So, it's interesting.

KH: And so the guy who said this to you at Lifetime, he said, "You know, our team was kind of afraid to come and play at Oxford, but then we saw you, and it looked like you had things in control, so we felt more comfortable."

[00:34:00]

BP: Well, and they didn't. Because of the scheduling, they had to go where they were scheduled to play, and if it was a team that wasn't from that neighborhood that was scheduled to play at Oxford, because we had that field at the time, they had to come in. So they didn't get what they were expecting. They were expecting to get in trouble.

KH: And they didn't.

BP: It didn't happen.

KH: I was going to ask, but I think you already answered the question. I was going to say, did some of those teams, or some of those white athletes who felt, or at least this one guy who said it felt a little bit more comfortable when they saw you here, was that because you were white? Was it because you had this good discipline of what was happening with your teams at Oxford? Do you have any ideas about that?

BP: Well, I think it was a combination. But the white part, I think, was secondary. At first, it was they came in, and they were afraid, just because [they] were coming into the Black area, afraid from what they thought they knew, but coming in, being surprised that it didn't

happen.

KH: That it was fine, and they had a good game, and it was collegial, and it was fine.

BP: And I was pretty big then, I was about 200 pounds. I had hair coming out of my neck. People always tell me that, and this guy that was a Lifetime, said "We came in and you intimidated us because of the hair on your neck." And so there were a lot of things physically that, it looked like I had control.

KH: Okay, so you looked like an authority figure who had things in hand. And how tall are you?

[00:36:02]

BP: 5'11".

KH: 5'11", so 5'11", 200 pounds and a Marine. And an athlete. So you had a certain way of carrying yourself that said, things are good, it's okay.

BP: And I grew up in the neighborhood, so I wasn't like some white guy coming in. I was just like, the police said, "He was there for two years before I knew he was white."

KH: That's a high compliment.

BP: Yeah.

KH: So you're in the Marines for three years?

BP: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KH: Is that right? And where were you stationed? Where did you serve?

BP: Camp Pendleton, California, and everything was in California.

KH: Okay, so the whole three years was out there. Okay. Because, yeah, Korea was done, Vietnam, not yet. Besides what you've just talked about in terms of the discipline that you learned in the Marine Corps carrying over to your coaching and your management here at

Oxford, were there any other ways that your time in the Marines affected your life or your role here at Oxford?

BP: Well, the Marine Corps affected my life because I went in the day I turned 17, scared to death, and did everything I was told to do. So I began to understand authority. I began to respect authority. So if I was told to do something, that helped me later on when I became an official. I officiated for 40 years, and that was a direct cause by Oxford. We started a program at Oxford for officials because when we were having tournaments that we sponsored in our gymnasiums and stuff, we needed our own officials so we didn't have to pay officials to come in. So a lot of my best friends were in this training program that became my best friends. So they were kids for me at Oxford, but we became officials together and grew up together officiating.

[00:38:23]

KH: And that's where you learned to officiate also? Was through the program at Oxford?

BP: Right. But I taught myself. Nobody taught me how to officiate. It was by reading and I had very few coaches that I grew up under that taught me anything, that I can go back and say, "This is what I got from so and so." You're all good people, but I learned from Oxford how to coach. Because I was brand new at coaching. The first thing I ever coached, the reason I got to Oxford, was because I was a hockey coach. I'll explain a little more about that later, but the fact that [pauses]—Lost my train there.

KH: That's okay. Since we're kind of naturally getting there anyway, you've come home from the Marines in 1960. Tell me about that call and what it was that brought you here to Oxford.

[00:39:35]

BP: Okay, when I just got out of the Marine Corps, just came home, the first phone call I

got was from John Pettiford. And John Pettiford told me about I-94, which I wasn't aware of. I mean, I was aware that it was there now, but not that it came through and what it did to the neighborhood and so on, because I didn't come home for three years. And he said, "I-94 came through, and we no longer have Rondo, and we have a freeway through there." And he said, one of the things that happened was we used to have Quonset huts. That land became available, and because of the freeway coming through it, it offered up some other reasons, but that field space became available, and that's where Oxford began. And so in 1950—let's see it would be in 1959 was when Oxford actually was—the land was built for fields. There were some fields there in 1959. I got there in 1960, the phone call from John Pettiford said, explain to me how that playground got there. And then he said, "I have become the president of the Oxford Booster Club, which is a group of parents that raised funds for these teams to have equipment and to get into leagues and so on." He said, "This summer, we had baseball." Talking about 1959. "This fall, we had football," and he said, "We would like to have a hockey team in '60 and would you coach it?" And of course, my background with him, he knew I was a hockey player, and there was nobody else that he knew of that knew anything about hockey. So I thought for about 15 seconds, because I had never coached anything before. I said, "Sure." So there I was in the late fall, just about the change of the season and going into 1960 was when I first coached an all Black hockey team at Oxford.

[00:42:20]

KH: [Inaudible].

BP: Because of that fall. And historically, it was the first all Black hockey team in St. Paul, first Black youth hockey team in Minnesota, and the first youth Black hockey team that I know of in the United States, possibly in the world. I had done some research, and the only

Black hockey teams that I had ever found anywhere besides the United States was in Canada, and they were adult teams, and they were sponsored by churches.

KH: Yeah, I think hockey, still to this day, right, has a reputation—whether it's grounded in reality or to what degree, I'm not sure, I don't follow hockey, but as being a pretty white-dominated sport.

BP: Oh yeah.

KH: In ways different than baseball, football, basketball, and here you were.

BP: And, interesting, in my senior year in high school, excuse me, I had a Black hockey player on that team. Lepercell was his name, and he was a big defenseman. He was about six foot-four, and he was always in my way, because he was so big. "Get out of the way, move, move!" I couldn't see anything. But hockey has played a great factor in the reason I got to Oxford.

[00:43:56]

KH: And how old were the kids that you were coaching that first year, like, what level?

BP: It was 12 and under.

KH: And what was that season like, your first experience of coaching?

BP: What was it like? Well, I got hooked! Especially because we won a championship. But I got hooked, so almost immediately after that championship game, I went to parks and recreation and applied for a job. And wouldn't you know where they put me? Oxford playground, because of my history.

KH: And maybe you remember these kinds of things, maybe you don't, either way, it's fine. But you said you had never coached anything before John Pettiford asked you to coach the hockey team here. What did you learn [coughs]—excuse me, about how to coach during that first

year of coaching?

BP: Uh, not very much.

KH: [Laughs.]

BP: [Laughs.] But I will admit that once I got to Oxford with no experience besides that in coaching, I and my players learned together how to coach. One of the most important people in my coming up is Hondo The Magician, John Hughes, who played for me. And I remember every practice we had in the beginning, we'd sit down after the game, and he would ask a ton of questions. And what it did for me, it taught me that I was not teaching a lot of things. He asked questions, "Why this? Why that? Why that?" And if he had to ask those questions, I wasn't teaching it. So that's one of the big things in my history that moved me in the direction of how to coach. I learned how to coach from what worked with my players.

KH: And how did you figure out the answer to the questions? Was it just a matter of you already knew—

BP: I knew the questions.

KH: You just had to teach them or coach them.

[00:46:07]

BP: That's when I learnt and that's what I see is wrong—not wrong today, but missing, is teaching, re-teaching, explaining why, demonstrating, have them do it. And then the next practice you have, you go back over, and you repeat, and you go back over. So every practice you start out everybody in the same way, throwing and learning, and you create an over-and-over-and-over, so that you no longer have to think about what to do, you're doing it. So that taught me a very important thing and how to coach. You're a teacher. You're a teacher first, and one of my philosophies from the Marine Corps, I think did it for me, is “kick him in the butt,

whisper in their ear, I love you.” So it was kind of give them that hard of "Why?", and then tell them, "That's okay. You'll get it. You'll do it. You'll get it."

KH: Yeah, that makes sense.

[00:47:46]

BP: There was one person that was really influential in my coaching, as the coach that I had, and his name was Glenn Gostick, and he was the assistant coach at the University of Minnesota. And the one year I went to the U—I graduated from the U, but the one year that I played at the U was freshman ball, because at that time, freshmen were not eligible to play varsity. So he was my coach—

KH: Baseball?

BP: Baseball. And he was a knucklehead. There were some things about coaching he didn't know, but he was a fundamentalist. Why you do this, how you do it, when you do it, what not to do. And I learned fundamentals from him, which was extremely important in my coaching success, was teaching and training the fundamentals.

KH: So you said you graduated from the U in what year?

BP: Oh man, was it '90?

KH: Okay.

BP: 2000, [19]90 [In transcript review, Peterson confirmed it was 1990].

KH: Okay. And what was your degree?

BP: Recreational Leadership.

KH: It was? Okay.

BP: And let me say this. When in the '60s, when I went to Oxford, I was also going to the U, I had just gone to the U. Yeah, and so there was a long gap between me going back to school,

and that was a GI bill that sent me back to school.

KH: Okay, okay. So you come home from the Marines, you get the call to coach hockey here at Oxford, and then you're at the U for one year playing baseball while you're coaching here as well. So tell me, you've already mentioned it. You said, "You know, after this really successful year of coaching hockey, and you win the city's championship. So you've talked a lot, you've had a lot of success, not just as a coach, but as a player, and that kind of feeds somebody's energy to keep going.

[00:50:10]

BP: Oh absolutely. The winning part. One time at Oxford, when I was still there, we had on the gymnasium wall, "Home of Champions." And I learnt that from Hazel Park. I learnt not only how to play to win for a championship, at least maybe I didn't know I was learning it, but it showed me how important it was to play hard, to play to win.

KH: So when you were coaching that first year, the hockey team here, can you describe what was Oxford at that time? What did it look like? What were the facilities of Oxford that first year you were here?

BP: Well, the first year I was there, or before I was there?

KH: Either or both.

BP: All right, before I was there, remember John Pettiford told me "We played baseball and we played football. Now we'd like to play hockey." So they did have field space, and they did have fields. They weren't very good, but they did have fields before I got there.

KH: And so when you got here to coach that hockey team, [coughs]—excuse me, obviously an outdoor rink.

BP: Outdoor rink.

KH: And was there any structure at Oxford at that time?

[00:51:55]

BP: No. What we used for changing your skates, they brought in a railroad car, boxcar, and that was used to keep warm. There's a little stove in there to keep warm and to change your skates.

KH: Okay, so that was the warming house?

BP: That was the warming house.

KH: And was it used only during hockey season?

BP: Yep.

KH: Suppose you wouldn't need it during—

BP: Well, it was on the field. It was right in the middle of the field. So they took down the hockey rink and there was no lights. Took down the hockey rink, and got rid of the—[pauses]

KH: The boxcar?

BP: Boxcar. And then the first year I was there when I went down and they gave me a job, there was no facility there besides the fields. The second year, they built a block building in the middle of the field, up near where Carroll Avenue used to go through. Then about a year and a half, two years after that, we built the New Oxford.

KH: Which part of this building was that, the one that came in the late '60s.

BP: The first gymnasium part, the second gymnasium part, plus—[pauses]

KH: The pool?

BP: The pool. The pool area was then built.

[00:53:55]

KH: Okay, so let's talk a little bit about you getting hired by the department. It was Parks

and Rec now. What was the name of the department when you got hired? Do you remember?
Was it like Parks and Playgrounds?

BP: Well, the playgrounds were called that. Parks and Rec playgrounds. Not recreation centers.

KH: Okay, because there wasn't a center.

BP: Well, in the whole city, they were called playgrounds. Not just Oxford.

KH: All of them. Okay. After you had this really winning season with the hockey team, you went and asked for, applied for a job.

BP: I went down and applied for employment with parks and rec.

KH: Okay and no holds barred, they hired you and sent you right back to Oxford.

BP: Well, I don't know if I remember them saying, but it seemed like they said something like, "We can't get anybody to go to Oxford." But I don't know if that's just something, somewhere in my brain, somebody said that. It might not have been them, but that was the issue. Nobody would go there.

KH: Okay. And so at that time, when you took the job, there was nobody else working here at Oxford?

BP: No, I think that year that I coached hockey, there was a person that, well, somebody flooded the rinks that first year. Even though I ended up cleaning them off and doing some of the flooding myself, but I didn't flood the other parts of the rink. You know, the regular skating rink. But there had to be somebody. And I think it was kind of like a maintenance person. There was no program.

KH: And that person maybe was working at other sites as well to do maintenance?

[00:56:02]

BP: Yeah, because I don't even remember somebody being there.

KH: So when you start in your official capacity through this job at the parks department, what is your job? I mean, what is either your job title, or what did they hire you to do here at Oxford?

BP: Well, I would say to run the program, but there was no program besides the sports, but I was in charge of the facility.

KH: Such as it was at the time, right?

BP: Whatever was going on.

KH: Okay. So you were kind of managing the whole shebang. The facility, the programming, which is sports. So were you the one then that had to find coaches for the teams that were playing out of Oxford?

BP: Well, eventually. But that first year that I was there in charge, they pretty much had in place who was going to be coaching baseball.

KH: Because they had already been doing it?

BP: Yeah. Because I remember that first year I didn't coach baseball, but that's when I met the Winfields and I told them, next year, you'll be mine. Because you're getting away with stuff now, but next year, you'll be mine. [Laughs.]

KH: [Laughs.] So that was the second year that you were in—

BP: In charge.

KH: —In charge that you started coaching baseball. Okay. And you had both the Winfields?

BP: Yeah.

KH: Steve and Dave.

BP: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KH: Okay. And so that person who had been coaching the baseball team, they just weren't rehired?

BP: Well, it was more than a baseball team the second year. It was like, teams.

KH: So there were multiple coaches.

BP: Yeah.

KH: Okay. And so, part of your job then, as the director of Oxford, was also to coach some of the teams?

[00:58:04]

BP: No.

KH: So those are two separate roles.

BP: Yeah.

KH: Okay.

BP: It's not a role that you get away with most of time. To do both.

KH: Okay, but you did it because—

BP: It was right there and I was putting in 80-hour weeks. It was my life. My hours might have been five hours, 25 hours a week, Monday through Friday, but it ended up being much more than that, with the coaching and opening when other places weren't open on the weekends.

KH: And so the official job that you were hired for by the parks department, was it a full-time job?

BP: Not at first.

KH: Okay. So it started as part-time?

BP: Part-time. Because the center was only open part-time. But it was full-time.

[Laughs.]

KH: Yeah, that's how those part-time jobs work often. So what is your recollection of what it was like to work for the parks department? Did you have a lot of contact with other parks department staff, or were you just pretty enmeshed and focused on what was happening here?

BP: Well, for quite some time, several years, I had very little to do with parks itself. They kind of just let me be. There was a supervisor that would come once in a while and say hi or whatever, but very little direction. So whatever happened at Oxford really was whatever looked like needed to happen.

[00:59:59]

KH: And what were some of the big things that you were focused on in those early years as manager, director, or whatever?

BP: Well, that's where my second year of skating, there was a young lady named Deb Montgomery, who really made a change in my feelings about an understanding of why we needed athletics for females and why we didn't have them for females because nobody else did before Title IX. We had female teams before Title IX, and some of our girls that went up to Central and played on their basketball teams had experience through Oxford. In fact, my wife was one of those, too, because she was on the team Central won the very first Girl's State High School Championship, and she was a member on that team, and her start had been at Oxford. And Lisa Lissimore, in fact, a couple of names that you mentioned earlier, Lisa Lissimore and Frank White are kids that played for me initially.

KH: I know you sent the thing that you wrote about Deb Montgomery, but tell me a little bit more about her and your relationship to her.

BP: Well, it first came about because of her speed skating, but her first year of speed

skating was not at Oxford. It was down at the hollow, which was on the other side of Dale and Central, right in that area. And let's see, that was her first year of speed skating. The second year when I was doing the rinks and everything, she was doing her speed skating practice at Oxford, but not under Oxford, per se, because we had no program going on. But I noticed that, and somehow we connected. And I saw how important it was because of her involvement. She happened to win, and she went under the name of Oxford, because in order to be in the city speed skating championships, you had to come directly from a playground. So even though we didn't have a speed skating program, she did come under the name of Oxford. And in winning that speed skating championship for the City of St. Paul, and that's a story in itself, because she skated against one of the women that went on to win the Olympics, which she beat in the city championships. But it showed me something in her. And then the more I was at Oxford, she was such a leader. Even though she didn't get to play in high school, she came before Title IX, so there was no place for her to play. I think in her case, it was almost a benefit of not being able to play sports because she put her energies into other things. She was the youngest member of the NAACP nationally. She was the first Black female police officer in St. Paul, first Black city-council person, female. And a lot of that showed me, or a lot of that came because of her not being able to participate in sports, I think. It put her in leadership roles in a lot of ways that she might not have ever done.

[01:04:20]

KH: And we have a street right up here, named for her. And was it you or Frank who sent the video—it was you! Of her being honored at the Vikings game, right? Just this season.

BP: Yeah.

KH: So she's quite an accomplished person. So you were saying that when you first saw

her here or met her, it got you thinking about developing athletic opportunities for girls.

BP: Yeah, because there weren't any. And, you know, I wasn't smart enough to think about it on my own. But I saw that here we had a female athlete who was good, but also a leader. And at that point, right after that season, we started girls sports.

KH: Okay, and do you remember what—I'm just gonna check on our time. Okay, are you doing good? Do you need a break at all?

BP: Pardon?

KH: Are you doing good? Do you need a break?

BP: I'm good.

KH: Okay. And do you remember what girl's sports were the first ones that you offered here at Oxford?

BP: I think there was softball. And we had flag football. We went to basketball because we started using gymnasiums. This was before we had gymnasiums. We used JJ Hill and a couple other schools for our practices, and then we would play games at other facilities that had gymnasiums. But we did get it rolling.

[01:06:09]

KH: Maybe I already said this, but I'm going to ask, anyway. Were there other girls sports programs at other rec centers in the St. Paul system?

BP: I wasn't really sure. They must have, because we did end up in leagues after the first year.

KH: Okay, so you had to play somebody.

BP: Yeah, somebody.

KH: Okay. Because I know kind of the origins of this project came from my interview

with Lisa and Linda who were talking about playing basketball and other sports here at Oxford and before Title IX. And that they didn't even know there was a need for something like Title IX. And I had interviewed some African American women who played basketball in Minneapolis. And, you know, ultimately, with Linda, perhaps at the U, and it seems like, based on my very small sample, one of them said "As girls, we couldn't play basketball over here. I remember watching boys play out one window." But Lisa and Linda and other girls were playing here. So it seems like Oxford or maybe the St. Paul system was doing something early on for girls. I say that not knowing much about the Minneapolis system. In those first years that you were here at Oxford, what were some of your biggest accomplishments or achievements? Like, what were some of the major changes, in addition to offering girls sports that you helped shepherd in here at Oxford?

[01:08:03]

BP: Well, the first couple of years, we really didn't have a facility to do much more than use it for skating season. So there wasn't much going on besides the sports. There was a lot of parental involvement with the sports and, you know, a lot of people watched. A lot of people came down. So there were a lot of spectators, but no program, per se, besides the sports.

KH: Okay. And this may seem a silly question, but here you go. What was your relationship as the director of Oxford with community members, aside from the kids who were playing the sports here at Oxford?

BP: Initially?

KH: Yeah, initially and as it evolved.

BP: Well if "community" means parents, then it was very involved. But other things we were not involved too much with in the first couple of years. Now, when we finally got a

building where we could do things, then it totally changed. We not only did athletics, we did other things.

KH: And was that the first building? Not this one, but the first—How did you describe it? The smaller—

BP: Smaller version of this building. Yeah.

KH: So once that was built, then you were adding additional kinds of programs. Like, what? What other kinds of programs?

[01:09:57]

BP: Well, seniors. Just a place for seniors. Not necessarily running a program, but somebody using a space for a senior program. And continuing on in sports, but only more. Like I remember, I showed you our rosters of '74 and, actually, those buildings were built right around '69. So it was quite a time before we got into the new buildings. The ones where you could really program.

KH: Am I remembering correctly from some of our team meetings that there were also craft programs and art programs and other kinds of recreational programs that weren't sports?

BP: Yep. We had a really good woman by the name of Pat Gaustad ran our craft program, and in fact, there's a room here that is called the Pat Gaustad Room. She's one of those people that would come down and do the craft program and then be gone. Wasn't full-time here. She was doing it throughout the city, but such an impression that she came here just about every day. She was one of our staff, even though she wasn't our full-time staff, the city full-time, we considered her as one of our staff because she was here so much.

KH: With Oxford being part of the whole St. Paul Parks and Recreation facilities network, did you have occasion to interact with the people who were doing your job at other

facilities? At Hazel Park, at other recreational facilities?

BP: Well, when we had city wide staff meetings, that type of thing, some trainings. But the training back in the day wasn't very much for Parks and Rec. I'm not quite sure if it's back there yet either.

[01:12:33]

KH: Did you have a sense anywhere along the way that Oxford, whether when it was even just the playground, the first smaller building, the bigger building, did you ever have a sense that Oxford wasn't getting as much attention or financing or support from the city as other facilities or other rec centers were?

BP: Boy, I can't answer that question. I really don't know. I know in terms of programming, we were really on our own.

KH: Okay. Meaning it was up to you to develop them, to staff them, to make them viable. So there was no, in your recollection, comprehensive planning for all the Rec Centers in St. Paul and here's what Oxford is going to do, and here's what Linwood is going to do.

BP: Well, I tell you, I really don't know.

KH: That's fine.

BP: Yeah.

KH: That's fine.

BP: In reflecting back now, I loved what I was doing. I love the way I was doing it. I love the fact that nobody bothered me doing it. And so what I missed from the city not providing me things, I found more comfortable and more successful, doing it my way. Assuming it was my way, because nobody directed me on how to do anything, or nobody criticized me for doing anything, or told me I couldn't do this or that.

[01:14:26]

KH: So you had some autonomy here?

BP: Yeah.

KH: To do what you wanted to do.

BP: It appeared that way. Yeah.

KH: Interesting. So if, and maybe we don't know for sure, but if, in fact, Oxford was not getting as much attention from the department, again, I don't know that. You don't know that, we don't know. But if it wasn't, the positive to that was you had some autonomy.

BP: And I guess the positive for me was that I wasn't being told that I was doing something wrong. And it seemed to be working for us in our community and our program. And looking back, it sure looked like everything was cool.

KH: Yeah. Well, and I know, I've looked through some local papers, both Black and kind of mainstream press here, and Oxford certainly was getting some attention, and it was being recognized as a very busy place that people wanted to be. People were coming through, they were participating, there were spectators watching. Even Minneapolis papers, I think, were recognizing that about Oxford.

BP: It is a great site for the City of St. Paul.

KH: And do you mean, like the specific location, or just the programs and the—

BP: The building is probably the best building.

[01:16:02]

KH: Okay. So, yeah, let's talk about the evolution of the buildings from the boxcar to then the smaller cement block—

BP: Concrete block.

KH: Concrete block facility. That came in what—

BP: A couple years, maybe the second year I was in.

KH: Okay. And then that was there until the first part of this current building was built in '69, is that right? And how involved were you as the director here in making those plans and planning what the space would be, and all that kind of stuff?

BP: Not involved. That's what always surprised me. But then it didn't bother me, because I was left alone. I think, you know, in reflecting back.

KH: And you were busy, like you were saying, you had enough on your plate between managing the programs at Oxford and coaching.

BP: Well, yeah, but the coaching part wasn't on my plate. I mean, it wasn't officially—

KH: Not officially part of your job.

BP: Right, right, right.

KH: So, but still, you were quite busy. And you got married during this time period. When did you and Gwen get married?

BP: We've been married 25 years.

KH: Okay, okay. So do you remember what year it was when you got married?

BP: Let's see, 1999, because this is 25 [years] coming up here, 26 [years].

KH: So is it fair to say that during, let's say from 1960 to 1970, most of your time and energy was spent at Oxford?

BP: From what until what?

KH: From 1960 to 1970? And maybe even beyond that. But for those 10 years you were here at Oxford. That was what you were doing.

[01:17:59]

BP: It was my whole life. From 1960 to 2025.

KH: So a lot longer than that 10 year period.

BP: Really, yeah. 60 plus years. Again, I can't go a day without something happening in my life that was caused because of my being at Oxford, or in some way, officially or unofficially or directly or indirectly involved with Oxford.

KH: During your coaching part of your life, were you coaching mainly baseball, or were you still coaching other sports as well?

BP: Mainly baseball, later on. Before that, the first 20 years of coaching was kids everything.

KH: Okay, and that was here? You were coaching as needed.

BP: Yeah. When I say everything, excluding hockey.

KH: Not hockey.

BP: Only coached hockey once.

KH: Just that one year, and then you were done. How interesting.

BP: We did have a hockey program the second year. It was an intramural program. Our four team league at Oxford. We didn't have enough kids to play that wanted to play hockey the second year.

KH: So it stopped after that?

BP: That was it. It was the only hockey team we ever had. [Laughs.] That's unusual, isn't it?

KH: So what about all those kids that played that first year that you coached and you won the city championship? What did they do?

[01:19:53]

BP: Well, there wasn't enough for them to move up and some to stay down. Because they all weren't 12. I don't really, you know, everything that I'm thinking about now is reflecting back "Why?" So really, not quite sure why, but I do know that I didn't have enough kids to play hockey on a team. But I had a lot of kids that wanted to play, so we had our own little league. And when I say kids, these weren't 12, these were 15, some were adults that played in this hockey league. I played in it myself.

KH: Yeah? Well, because you were young! Right? You started coaching in 1960 so you were 20.

BP: 20. I was young.

KH: Young, so you could've played. So after that hockey season, you were still coaching baseball, some football, and basketball. Well, basketball, I know you were coaching that a bit.

BP: I coached some basketball, yeah.

KH: And did Lisa and Linda play when you were coaching basketball?

BP: They played on a team that I coached, yes.

KH: And that was here at Oxford?

BP: Yes.

KH: Because you were also involved in the SUBA, right? The Summit University Basketball Association?

BP: Yeah.

KH: And that was a separate basketball league from the city rec program?

BP: SUBA was—yeah. [Laughs.] It was teams that played in leagues. We didn't have our own SUBA League but we had teams that played in city leagues.

KH: Okay. But Lisa and Linda played basketball here with you while you were

coaching?

BP: Yes.

KH: Do you remember them?

BP: Oh yeah.

KH: Can you speak to their athletic skills and talents?

[01:22:01]

BP: Oh, I don't know. That's too much work.

KH: Yeah, that's fine. I mean, you've talked about so many people who were important to you in your journey to and at Oxford. Are there any other people that you want to acknowledge or mention or talk about who were particularly important to you through your time at Oxford?

BP: Well, I think Frank White is number one. We became friends either the first or second year I was at Oxford. He played for me.

KH: And what was he playing?

BP: Played baseball. And our friendship, let's see, I think he was in college at the time. He ended up working for us at Oxford. He was a worker. He also went from us to Martin Luther King as a worker. But he and I, our friendship, right up to yesterday, when we talked, probably the most important friendship I have, and longest. Him and Steve Winfield and Dave Winfield, they are what you call lifelong friends. I mean, they are my best friends. And not just people I knew at Oxford, but we all grew up together at Oxford.

KH: That's a unique thing.

[01:23:59]

BP: I remember Lisa playing, I think some flag football one time. I did have one girl that played baseball, and that was Weller Johnson. Passed a few years ago.

KH: So she played baseball, not softball?

BP: She played some softball, too, but she's the only girl I ever had that was ever on a team, and I have a photo of that, and I've got her circled. You've seen that one?

KH: Yeah. It's a great photo. And why did she play baseball?

BP: Because she had the skills.

KH: Do you remember what position she played? You don't?

BP: No, I don't. It was in the infield, but I'm not sure.

KH: So she's in the infield. Okay.

BP: What really makes me feel old is when my kids are passing. She passed a couple years ago, and we had her homegoing right here, right at Oxford.

KH: That seems fitting. We're about a quarter after 11. So our conversation has kind of taken us from 1940 to 1970. Obviously, you know, there's many decades after that where you remained involved here at Oxford, and you know, we've got the Billy Peterson Field just across the street here.

[01:26:01]

BP: And again, every one of those things is because I went to Oxford. Without a doubt, my rebirth. Anything, everything is connected to Oxford in my life in some small way or big way.

KH: Can I ask you a couple questions about officiating?

BP: Sure.

KH: So you've talked about your own experiences as an athlete, playing multiple sports. We've talked a bit about coaching and how really it's fundamentally about teaching and striking that balance between kind of discipline and holding kids responsible, and also encouraging them

as well. What about officiating? What makes a good official?

BP: You have to have the ability to control things, that's for sure. But to be a good official, you have to know how to use that control. I mean, you run everything in the game. You're in charge. But there's some times when you have to use that being in charge in a positive manner and pray that you get the call right. [Laughs.]

KH: [Laughs.] And what sports did you officiate?

[01:28:03]

BP: Well, I never officiated hockey. I officiated basketball, baseball and football, all in the high school league and some at the collegiate league. One of our guys, Timmy Tschida, professional umpire. He and I worked together at the U a couple of times. I took him out there. Nobody but I know this, but he was only in the 10th grade when he went out with me to the university. I had the opportunity to bring somebody with me to work a game, so I brought him. I don't know if we can include him in Oxford, but I guess so in some way. [Laughs.]

KH: I know Oxford is important in terms of it having developed this group of officials as well. Because I think at one of our last team meetings, you and Frank were talking about that. And am I correct in remembering that part of the significance of that was that Oxford was also training and developing non-white officials, so African Americans who then went on to become path breakers in the officiating world, is that correct?

BP: That is correct. And I never even thought of that until Frank brought it up at one of our meetings recently. And there were very few officials. In fact, of the officials that we trained at Oxford, our own staff, Gayle Anderson, Roger Neal, Frank, myself, we all became high school officials because of that need to have officials at Oxford. Oxford was the reason that we ended up being in high school officiating, moving in that direction.

[01:30:26]

KH: Because you got the training and experience here.

BP: And that also is where Frank, mainly, because he was with the high school league as a coordinator for basketball, and he made the connection of no African Americans in the high school league anywhere. So we think that Oxford had quite a bit to do with that, too. If not developing the first, certainly many in the beginning. My brother-in-law, Bob Crow, Gwen's brother, is one of those officials that grew up at Oxford and learned how to officiate at Oxford and went on. In fact, he won an award not too long ago that was developed through Oxford and Frank and myself with the Saints, the Jimmy Lee award. And Bob was the second recipient of that. It's a statewide award for an umpire.

KH: This might be a very ignorant question, but here you go, do most officials officiate in one sport? Or do many officials do multiple sports?

[01:32:00]

BP: I think most do multiple.

KH: Okay.

BP: Multiple, meaning mostly one or two. Not a lot do three or four. But there are some that do many, at least three seasons.

KH: So in the same way I asked you early on, as we were talking here, you know, what skills transfer between different kinds of sports as an athlete, are there skills that transfer between different sports as an official? I mean, one of the things you said, "Well, you have to be able to have control and know how to use it well in a game." Are there other things you think that apply to officials? What makes a good official, regardless of the sport?

BP: Well, I don't know if it makes a good official, but one of the things that helps a good

official is appearance. And appearance, a lot of times, has to do with how you control your weight. You know, because people get on officials, that if they appear like they know what they're doing, they don't get a lot of heat. I don't want to say a heavy official, because that's not fair, because there's a lot of great heavy officials, but if they don't carry that, and can't get in position because of that, or people think they can't because of it, so appearance is pretty doggone important. To keep yourself looking good, shoes shined, you know, and shirt tucked in, and all those little things that are important in appearance.

KH: Well, and now that you're talking about it, I would imagine that, I mean, granted, an official is not playing the game. They're not the athletes on the court or the field or whatever, but there's a level of, and I suppose it varies by sport, but there's a level of physicality to being an official, right? You got to move with the court on a basketball game. You have to move from place to place, or a football field. You know, maybe a little bit less mobility in baseball. But you have to be in decent shape to be an official. Is that right?

[01:34:24]

BP: Oh yeah. Baseball, too, because you're especially if you're working a two-man crew or a three-man crew, you're going from here to there. The ball is hit, and if there's nobody on base, you got to take this runner all the way to third. So all the sports you need to be in shape.

KH: And do you think that, and this question would apply to both being an official and a coach? Do you think it is important that an official or a coach has actually played the sport that they are coaching or officiating?

BP: That's a really good question. I think it's, I don't know if it's absolutely necessary, but I think it's another plus, because you know what they are going through, and especially when you're dealing with the coach, you know how you deal with the coach. If you have coached

yourself, you know what to expect, or you know how to respond back, or how you should respond back, not necessarily how you do. So in officiating, you would hope that nobody is judged just by their appearance. But appearance is important in everything you do. So it's no less important here, and a lot of times, if they have no other reason and they just don't like a call, whether it's right or wrong, they don't like it, they're going to get on you because of your appearance. And that's not fair, but that's reality.

[01:36:04]

KH: Interesting. Yeah, officials, they're interesting because, in some ways, as a spectator of a sport that is being officiated, you don't want to have to even think about the officials. You just want them to make sure things go well, and that competition is fair and undertaken according to rules, and you hope that the officials aren't visible, whether actually physical or in terms of having to make controversial calls. But yet they are really critical for ensuring all of those things happen. That competition is fair, following the rules. Interesting.

BP: But it's impossible.

KH: Oh, I bet.

BP: To do all those things. Because each person sees something different, and from their position, they see it different than a spectator, either on TV or in-person, in the distance or where you are. So it's a reality, but it's not real. It's not fair, but it's going to happen.

KH: Well, Billy, it is almost 11:30. I think we should wrap this up. Again, I'm sure there's more we could talk about your experiences at Oxford, especially in the latter part of your time here, but not today, because we've already been talking for almost two hours. Is there anything though that you want to add today before we turn the recorder off?

[01:37:50]

BP: I don't know, just again to reinforce, the word "hockey," so important in my life. The word "Oxford" is so important in my life. And really every day, something about Oxford comes into play in my life. It's wonderful. I love it. I'll miss it when I—. I'm glad we're doing this, because in another year or two, I probably couldn't do this.

KH: How old are you?

BP: Eight-four. I'll be 85 [Peterson clarified in the transcript review that he turned 85 later in 2025].

KH: And you were saying that your memory isn't as good. Nobody's memory is as good as it was when they were younger.

BP: Mine was never any good. [Laughs.]

KH: I must say, and I will say it on record as well, that I have been very, very amazed and impressed with what you can recall of this really long life spent at Oxford.

BP: Like the thing about David Pettiford, that's what I read at his homegoing, I could have never done that on my own. I couldn't have. That's why I did it that way. That's why my journey had to go on paper. Something will press me to remember something, but when I'm speaking ad lib, it doesn't work very well.

KH: It worked very well today. But, I mean, just from the material you've sent me, clearly, you are moved to record some of those memories in writing. And I think that's incredibly valuable, because your memories for all of us—

[01:39:59]

BP: —And they will be valuable when I'm gone.

KH: Yeah. If there's nothing else you want to get on tape, so to speak, for today, then I

will just thank you very deeply for sitting down and talking.

BP: Well, I appreciate all you're doing for us. It's kind of neat. I, also, although I don't need it, but I will accept it, is I appreciate being paid. That's kind of neat.

KH: Yeah.

BP: I didn't know that was going to happen initially.

KH: It is only fair and right to do that. So I'm very grateful that the Historical Society is building that into this project as well. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]