Betty Olson Interview with Doris Bonneau
04/18/2019
TRANSCRIPT

Doris Bonneau: Hello. My name is Doris Bonneau, and this location is – here is the Franco-American Collection at the University of Maine at the College of Lewiston-Auburn. I have with me today Betty Olson, who has agreed to be – to share her story. Betty, would you like to tell us a little bit about who you are, your name, where you were born, and a little bit about your family?

Betty Olson: OK, well, my name is Betty, it’s a pleasure to be with all of you. I have a story to tell you that I – I’m very proud. My name – well – my mother, Mrs. Grace Lowell, was born in 1904, Canadian, a little bit of Irish, we were pure family. My ancestors arrived 15th century, settled at Saint-Gilles, Quebec, from what we gather, be patient with us [[laughter]]. And then my mother was Mrs. Grace – was Grace Villeneuve, was born in New Hampshire, and so she met my father Richard Lowell – we don’t have much on my father unfortunately, he was given away when he was a little baby, but we did the tracing, and he was raised we think in Durham, Maine, so it makes him a Mainer, from what I gather. A very nice gentleman. And my mother married, with him, she had five children, three girls and two boys. My oldest sister was Madeleine Rainey, and then was Richard, there was Betty, who’s me, and my sister Monica, and my youngest brother David. All are deceased now, I’m the only one to tell my story, which I’m very proud of.

In the forties, there was a great depression in the world. Millions suffered with that, poverty, no money, no job, it was unbelievable. Anyway, so in those days something wonderful happened in the world, ice shows became very famous. We have a lady that I would like to tell you about, her name was Sonja Henie. She was born in Swedish, and she was a gold medalist – she was in competition with all the women, but she was the only one that seemed to make the top. Mary Ban Owen was her competition. Mary Bell lived in Massachusetts, and so there was a lot of competition. But here comes ice shows all of a sudden, Sonja Henie came with her, she wanted to make movies in the United States. So she came from a very well-to-do family, I did a lot of research on Sonja, became one of my favorite person, and I read a biography that tells me a little bit more about her. And Sonja was to make 15 movies in ice skating, and then this is how she brought all of herself into our world and opened up all the doors in the United States for survival.

So my mother had two daughters – three daughters, but two of them were to become skaters. Monica, my youngest – my oldest sister and I was the youngest. So my mother decided one day, let’s have some skaters in the family, why not? The whole world was came alive with ice skating. The shows were fantastic. Nine billion people saw that in fifty years – the true story, I did the research at the library. Well Monica, my mother had two daughters, she decided that Monica would become the skater in the family and I would accomplish her, so I would go to Lynn, Massachusetts, at the sport center, for skating lessons. So I was one of the sisters who took care of her, watched over her like sisters do for each other, and then one day someone
said to my mother, “How come Betty’s not skating?” So, would you know, that it was agreed that we would give her a chance.

So they gave me a free pair of ice skates, and away I went – and I still doing it today at my age, I’m very proud. I cannot tell you about the people that I met all over the world in the ice shows, it was fantastic, elegant, too bad we don’t have that in our world today, because I think we’re missing an awful lot.

DB: Betty, would you tell us a little bit about when you were in the ice shows, did you ever speak French?

BO: Believe it or not, well, French was always part of my life – my mother was pure French.

DB: Right.

BO: But well, what I liked about the ice shows was that I met people from all over the world. I want you to know that we skated with kings and queens from all over the world. They would come to the ice shows. And so what happened is that I went – it was, well, I told the story about a newspaper article last year in 2018. And it made the Sun Journal, March 26 of 2018. I never realized the story would be that famous, because I told my colleague here Doris, I never thought that it was going to that big.

But, though, I had a feeling that something was going to come up, because I should have done this a long time ago. But my brother, who’s [[??]] deceased, said, “You know Betty, why don’t you write the story about our family?”

It was about us, it was our survival, everybody worked at it. Even my grandmother got in the act.

DB: Talk to me about any stories that you recall of what life was like for you when you were little, and your grandmother was bringing you up.

BO: Well, you know what happened, way before the ice shows – way before we got involved, my mother had family in Saint-Gilles. And then my grandmother lived on Knox Street in Lewiston, it was an honor to be with her, because I’ll never forget the Lewiston park, there was a gazebo there that’s over a hundred years old. I remember walking through the park, and I was telling my friend, I would see these nurses pushing carriages, they were child – they took care of children. I can still see the nurses, all dressed up, children were covered and beautiful, and they were walking all over the place and Lewiston City Hall. And every Sunday, I’ll never forget, we couldn’t wait to get out of our homes and go to the park, because they would have the band perform every Sunday. It was massive, people got along, it was a different world, anyway, put it this way.
So anyway, so that’s what happened, and then we started – when we got smarter and better in our craft, we started to teach at the Lewiston – then it was Saint Dom’s Arena, in those days. Remember, this is a different world. And every Sunday, we would have our classes and we would teach all the children, the mémés and the pépés, I had one that I favored, he was 95 years old and he was just as good as I was.

DB: Now did they pay you for this?

BO: We were paid for that. What we did is, well, there wasn’t a lot of money in those days, I think we did a lot of free work to be honest. We got paid for the ice shows, we were happy. So, we did that on Sunday, then we had to go back to Massachusetts because we were still learning our lessons. That’s why we had not turned professionally – that’s why we had taken no money in those days. You get money when you turn professional.

Anyway, so I’m there walking around one day and a man says “Hey, listen, how come Betty’s not skating?” So one gentleman talked to my mother and said “Really I think you should put Betty on the ice.” So here we go, and I loved every moment of it. So they gave me a free pair of ice skates – I can still see them giving me those skates, I’ve got them even today. They are treasures. And so we started to skate, we got better, we kept going to the arena to teach, because we were living in Lewiston, Maine, and my mother was very, we were very close to our mothers.

So one day Monica – see there was a United States Association Skating Club there, and those are the people that they would – when all the ice shows started to come, they would go and see, you know, they were scouts, they were looking for skaters. So when you worked for the – when you went to the arena in Massachusetts, they gave the name of my sister and I. And so Monica was the first one to go. And she did three ice shows, I think she did the Icecapades, she did Holiday on Ice, and I think she might have done a few that was out there, we had five going, you’ve got to remember.

Well, she went in, and she went, and I stayed home. I was the – I was home with my mom. And I was still teaching at the arena, so I had my little job to do. And going back and forth. So one day, you know, we got a call, and my mother says, “Well I got a call from the Ice Follies through the association – they want you to come to audition in Boston.” I’ll never forget, we had gone to the ice show that day, and at 11 o’clock that night I remember going back and changing my clothes to perform, and I was auditioned, I was very proud. I met the most wonderful people in the world, and these were wonderful people, and then I started to tour, you know, with them a little bit. You know, there were spots – there were six ice shows going at one time. Europe, Lewiston, east, west, whatever, they’re all over the place. So if you were a good skater you could go and have – enjoy that, but you were paid for that, you know. So once you turn professional, you can get paid. It was a long time.

And so I went and came back, so one day my girlfriend called and says “How would you like to go on a blind date?” and I said “Gee, I don’t know.” You know, boys were not an issue in those
days. So I went to this dance, and it was a local base, I had never been, and I went out on an evening all dressed up thinking something wonderful is going to happen, and by golly it did. I see this gentleman walking down the hall in his uniform and there was my husband, Raymond Olson. Tall, blond, and blue eyed kind of a guy, you would have loved him. Well, it was love at first sight, and I married him six weeks after I met him. I was to be with Mr. Olson 55 years of my life. We had four girls and four boys. I lived in New York, I was a New Yorker, Poughkeepsie, New York. We lived there, raised my children. My children are beautiful kids, they’re simple. My husband’s attitude was in those days, we’re going to give them a roof over their heads, three meals a day, and an awful lot of love, but they all had to succeed for themselves. He would not let anybody stay at the house. So when we retired, we went to Jacksonville, Florida, where we retired, and that’s where I lost my husband.

So now I’m back into the state of Maine, which is my treasure, because I have so much history, so much ancestors. And writing the story, by the way, I think I’m a better person, because I went back in time that I had forgot years ago, and I look at my world today and I am so proud to bring my craft back. This story is not about me. It’s about the people that I worked with, the skaters, who did volunteer, brought smiles into the world. Someone says, “What did you do in the ice show?” Well, it was so – I wrote a story, may I tell you the story that we say that made me who I am today, the story that I wrote for the newspaper, should I read it? But I’m going to leave the Olsons out of it, you know, you didn’t like that, remember? So that would tell them pretty much what was going on.

DB: [[handing BO a sheet of paper]] Here you go.

BO: All right, thank you very much. OK. It come out March 26, twenty eighteen. It was a Valentine’s story, that’s how this whole thing got me going. My youngest brother, who’s deceased now, said “Betty, why don’t you write the story about our family?” and I said “I will.” So I did. So I wrote my story and then I wrote it and I called the Sun Journal and I said “I have a story that I’d like to share with you.” Never thought about anything other than what I had said. And this is how it appeared. I had a lady come in from the Sun Journal who took my deposition, we did a draft together, and pictures were located in the local area. Well, I never realized that the story was going to go on Facebook because I don’t do computers or Facebook, but boy did it got me going. And this is how we wrote the story.

[[reading from sheet of paper]]

Betty Olson’s mother saw one of Sonja Henie in the 1940s with a gorgeous Olympic movement, graceful on ice, and that was it. “My mother bought my sister a pair of skates and said ‘OK, let’s go skating.’” Not long after, Olson traveled to Massachusetts with her sister, doing a trip for lessons. “One gentleman, he saw my mother and he said, ‘How come Betty isn’t skating?’” Olson said. “Well, guess what? They gave me a free pair of ice skates, I went on the ice, and away I went and I’m still going skating today. I’m 80 years old and still skating, and very proud.” Olson and her sister a year younger, Monica Bodily Olsen Lowell, were known locally as the Lowell Sisters back in the days. Both skated national touring ice shows as teens. Bodily died in
2012, Olson said. She felt a pull lately to write their memoirs, and she started in longhand beginning unearthing old photos – I’ve got some beautiful pictures, I’d like to show them by the way. “You don’t see that glamor we had anymore. That time, there were stars in our eyes.” And we did have the stars. The sisters were from a family of three girls and two boys. During the school year they skated, is now the Anderson Bank Colisee. In the summer, they headed to skating school in Massachusetts. “I gave a speech recently saying that teachers make the champion. We were skating with Tenley Albright, Carol Ice, we skated with the world champion and we felt ten feet tall. The joy that I felt when we were together, we were doing that, it was a great time in our lives.” I’m still smiling as you can tell. As their skill improved, they gave lessons in Lewiston. “We had small children and we had their pépés and their mémés, and eventually” this is how we did it, we were teaching at the ice, and then OK. “So in those days, you could live out of a suitcase. I thought it was fun. I didn’t have a chance to burn out. And we had our costumes, we thought they were beautiful.”

**DB:** Do you want to show your costume?

**BO:** [[holds up picture of herself in skating costume]] This is when I was fifteen years old then. I was just teaching, I was just learning to be a teacher at a local area then.

**DB:** OK, thank you.

**BO:** That’s something, huh? And you can show them the one with the professional, when I turned professional. Let’s show Monica too, because it was about my sister and I.

**DB:** This one?

**BO:** Yes. [[holds up picture of Monica in skating costume]] This is my sister Monica, she was also an ice skater, did very very well for herself. And then I’m going to show you a picture when I turned professional. And that’s when I turned professional. [[holds up picture of herself in skating costume]] And I’m very very proud of that. It was a great time in our lives. That’s when I was very pretty. [[laughs]]

**DB:** Oh, you’re still very pretty.

**BO:** Anyway. But anyway. So anyway, so, OK, here we go. [[continues reading from article]] Not long after the tour she met her husband Raymond on a blind date. The next day he popped into the Colisee during the skating lesson. “My students say, ‘Hey, there’s someone who keeps looking at you,’ and I turn around and there was my husband-to-be, Raymond Olson, on the bleachers.” After pointing him out to her mom, she said “Bring him over, I want to meet him,” and it was love at first sight. The couple had four boys and four girls and lived out of state. She returned to Maine in twenty thirteen, several years after his death. So, so anyway. “So I took a year off from skating after breaking my kneecap about two years ago while I was skating on pond ice” – I should have never been on the ice [[shakes finger at camera]] on a lake but I did – “I want to make sure I healed well and the will was there but my knees would say ‘uh-uh’.” She
skates during public skating hours at the Colisee. She doesn’t give lessons officially, but says that she often can’t resist gravitating to people who want pointers. “I remember my growing up years when we had so little, I never forgot the joy I felt when someone took me under their wings and to teach me. We have to go back to that kindness and joy in this world. I’m so proud to be part of this little history.”

**DB:** Thank you. Well that’s wonderful. One of the things that you said that really struck me was that we have to go back to the kindness and the joy in this world, and that you remember your growing up years when you had so little. Do you remember anything – do you have a story or recollection of having so little and being able to get through when you were living with your grandmother?

**BO:** Well, you know, I looked at that, because you know as you’re getting older, your mind goes back, you know, because you take life for granted. I think it’s good to take a leave of absence. But you know, if you always knew where you come from, you always know where you’ve been, you know where you come from, you’re going to succeed no matter what happens in your lifetime. And I teach this to my children today on the ice, I tell them, you know, it’s not so much what you do, but it’s how you do it, that the world picks up on your beauty of a person, you see. So yes, I’m a great teacher, I’ve been taught well, I’ve been taught well, I’ve been lucky, and I just feel that sometimes I’m the luckiest girl on earth, because I experienced such wonderful moments.

**DB:** Thank you very, very, very much.

**BO:** There was no sadness in my life. I think I was – I’m a Taurus, I’m the bull, I’m very strong. I was born in April 24, 1937.

**DB:** So your birthday is soon.

**BO:** I’ve got a birthday. And guess what, I’m having a big birthday party.

**DB:** Good for you. Good for you.

**BO:** And I thought – I wish that I could talk – I talked to all of my friends that I skated all over the world. You saw the book, you remember the pictures, and the ice show, and how we did it, we entertained nine billion people. And that brought a smile – what we did made people smile, forget their trouble of the depression.

**DB:** That’s just wonderful. Thank you Betty.

**BO:** I think we’ve done well.

**DB:** I think so too.
BO: Do you like it?

DB: Definitely.

BO: [[laughs]]

END OF INTERVIEW

Sun Journal article: “People You Know: Betty Olson, 80 and still skating”