

Pittsburgh Oral Histories  
Pennsylvania Department  
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



**BMD**

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at her home in the Beechview neighborhood of Pittsburgh

05-04-07

Transcribed 12-18-07 – 12-19-07

Reviewed by phone 01-05-08

Revised 01-14-08

Interviewer's Note

*Even though World War II was raging, it was a more relaxed, less frantic time, perhaps a classier time. People used fountain pens. Reusable fountain pens were not thrown away, but were repaired. About 1940, in Pittsburgh, the ballpoint pen was introduced as "revolutionary." "You didn't repair it...you either put a refill in...or you just threw it out." Here is a Pittsburgh family whose business was invested in that classier*

*technology—selling and repairing the prestige of writing—the fountain pen.*

Interview

[I give BMD a pen in order to sign a release for the interview. She notices the brand of pen it is and remarks:] Oh, "Pilot." I remember the president from Pilot.

bc: We've just "toured" your house; and you've virtually given me the story of your life, your businesses, your photography, and your family. I don't know where to begin: you've told me so much. One of the things you said that got me really worked up was that your family owned the Burke (Meyer) Building. [The oldest commercial building in Downtown Pittsburgh, built in 1836, to have survived the Great Fire of 1845.]

BMD: My father rented part of the building at different times and when the Denny—[Ebenezer Denny, first mayor of Pittsburgh]—estate wanted to sell it, he decided he would buy it. (That was in the mid 1940s.) At the time my Dad still had a retail store. By 1971 they were becoming wholesalers and it was almost impossible to unload trucks and move the merchandise in and out. Another competitor was going out of business [who] had a warehouse on the North Side. So my Dad sold the building and moved to the warehouse on the North Side and we were then wholesalers.

bc: He'd always been in the fountain pen business?

BMD: Yes. He learned to repair pens and such before World War I. He started his own business in 1920. He and my mother were married in 1921 and lived on the North Side until I was coming along in 1923. They moved to Beechview, I think, mainly because it was a new community—reasonably new—we celebrated our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary a year ago—and trolleys were available. We didn't have a car [until 1941]; we rode the trolley all the time. And it was what everybody did at the

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time. It was more unusual to own a car where I lived than it was to ride the trolley.

bc: How did he get involved in pens?

BMD: I really don't remember; I don't know.

My husband, Bill, was a football player, varsity letterman at Pitt and was going to be a coach and a teacher and I was going to be a teacher also. Then I decided to change to business. I went to the Graduate School of Business. (This was during World War II.) They were accelerating having summer classes. I went to the Business School and, when I graduated, I was just a month past my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and I had a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree. [BMD laughs.] And I was too young and too inexperienced. I started at college when I was 16 and that's ridiculous I realize now. [My husband] decided that he liked the pen business and so, when he graduated—he went to school again to graduate after World War II—and went to work part-time for my Dad. When we were married, he decided [that work] would be full-time. He was the one who enlarged the business.

bc: The name of the business was...?

BMD: Fountain Pen Service.

bc: I've talked with people who sold sheet music at Gimbel's, who sold buttons at Gimbel's....

BMD: (I worked at Gimbel's.)

bc: You worked at Gimbel's too?!

BMD: I worked at Kauffman's, Gimbel's and Boggs & Buhl's.

bc: How did the family deal with the fact that people no longer had the class to use fountain pens, and fountain pens became passé?

BMD: I remember the first ballpens. They had rented the Urban Room and the ballroom of the William Penn Hotel to introduce...the ballpoint pen...because this was so revolutionary...and the kind of ink that they used. You didn't repair it: you either put a refill in or if it was, eventually, inexpensive, you just threw it out. (And added to the landfill problem.)

bc: They rented the Urban Room....

BMD: ...and the ballroom because they connected—the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of the William Penn Hotel.

bc: When was this?

BMD: I would guess 1940.

bc: So the handwriting was on the wall that early?

BMD: Yes. But people were still buying fountain pens and using them all through World War II. Now there are so many things beside ballpoint pens. But I guess it didn't make that much of a difference since my Dad was getting older....

I used to repair pens; so did my husband. I like working with my hands: I thought that was fun. I worked for Dad after I'd worked for a department store for a while....

For 29 years I was a housewife and mother until my husband died. And then I went back to work. I ran the company for ten years until I sold it. I waited until my father died.

I was the only child and I had an only child...Diane.

bc: I'm an only child.

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BMD: [My daughter] didn't like being an only child. I never minded it. I had grandmothers at home. There was always somebody there for me: somebody to talk to and listen to what happened at my day at school....

[When I took over the business], I didn't realize at the time—[I asked myself] “Why did I study business?”—(even though it was retail business I was studying, not wholesale, still a lot of the same things apply)—and “Why was I in Pitt Players and not afraid of a microphone and being in front of people?” That was preparing me to run this business! And have my annual show where I invited all the people and fed them and showed all the products and entertained them and spoke with them! It was difficult: it took me several years to learn what I had to do. I asked the help of everybody I could, [everybody] who came along. A lot of people helped me and we did very well. But then the situation changed: the department stores dropped their stationary departments and all the pens. (College bookstores were still good.) Pharmor came in and we lost pharmacy business. (A lot of independent pharmacies closed.) Office Depot, Staples—all that came in. And that put a lot of the small office supply stores—individually-owned—that put the [small stores] out of business.

bc: I enjoy Weldin's [415 Wood Street]. I've been going to Weldin's ever since I came to Pittsburgh.

BMD: My Dad worked at Weldin's before he started his own business.

There were just so many places closing and we were losing business, but, I thought, I can't do anything while my Dad's alive because this was his life. He'd spent 60 or more years doing that. (He was almost 92 when he died.)

After he died, different people asked if I wanted to sell and I thought, No, I just guess I better do this. But I hated to spend the rest of my life in that warehouse....

We had the third and fourth floors. It was the Hartmann Building on Madison Avenue on the North Side. The freight elevator kept breaking all the time. There were holes in the floor. It was cold in the winter and terribly hot in the summer. All of the product had to be taken off the loading dock because there were two other businesses in the building: Hartmann on the first floor and an awning place on the second floor. Everything had to be moved out immediately on the freight elevator and, when it broke, you had to carry it up the stairs and the elevator broke frequently and they had trouble getting parts for it. (I spent more time praying for that elevator with a couple other people in the office and we prayed, “Please get the elevator fixed for us.”) But it was not an easy life. It was hard coming home and taking care of this place by myself.

My Dad was such a great guy. Everybody liked him. The neighbors liked him when he was home. He liked to come into the warehouse even though he didn't do much. (I'm very sorry I never kept more of his equipment. But, at the time, somebody was fixing pens: a young man wanted to buy it so I sold him the parts.) After Dad died, a young woman wanted to buy the business: she quit her job in Chicago and came back to Pittsburgh again but she couldn't get financing and I think to this day it's because she was a woman. In 1985. And they still weren't giving a lot of loans to women. So, two men came along who had been salesmen in Pittsburgh and they wanted to buy it and I sold it to them. My daughter did not want to run the business; she wanted to get out of it.

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bc: Does the business still exist?

BMD: No.

bc: You've shown me pictures of your ancestors. Talk about your family a bit.

BMD: The oldest ancestor, who came first, was Michael Knorr. [The "K" is pronounced.] He was a Hessian soldier hired by the North to fight in the Civil War. His fiancée came over after the war and they were married. Her name was Caroline Rhinehart. They had several sons. My grandmother was the only daughter that they had. She was Caroline Elizabeth. (We didn't know her name was "Caroline" until after she was dead and we found her wedding certificate. She was always "Lizzy.") She was married young—her late teens. She married Gottfried Ortmiller who was six-weeks-old when his parents came over on the boat. They had two older children and more children here later on. I keep thinking how horrible that must have been—[that experience of crossing the Atlantic]. They settled in Troy Hill [in Pittsburgh].

My father—his father was born in Germany—his name was Otto Meier. He lived in Spring Hill [in Pittsburgh]. He was a barrel-maker for some beer company....

My grandfather, Gottfried, was educated at Economy in Ambridge and worked for Pressed Steel Car Company making Pullman cars.

My father's mother—her name was Deanie Horstman. She was one of either eight, nine, or ten children.... (There must have been a lot.) She was a younger child. She had older brothers who came to this country. When she was about 16, I think, she came here and, of course, she had her brothers here to greet her. She was a maid for a Lutheran minister. They were married and had three children. Arthur, my father, was the oldest. On Arthur's birth certificate it's all written in German—the church they went to was German Lutheran in Allegheny City [today Pittsburgh's North Side]—and he had to study German three years before he could be confirmed. (And I don't think he remembered any of it though.) His birth certificate calls him "Otto Wilhelm" instead of "Arthur William."

My mother's family—she was the middle child. She had an older brother and a younger brother. She always said, Don't have three kids because the middle kid doesn't get a fair deal. Of course it might have been the fact that she was a girl also.

My Dad had the two younger sisters. Arthur was there to take care of them.

I was the only child of their marriage. I was born in Beechview on Rutherford Avenue at ten o'clock at night by a doctor in a tuxedo—he had been at a formal dinner. (I think that's why I'm a "night person.") I grew up there and lived there until I was married. [As I said], we did not have a car until 1941. Dad and I both passed our driving test in July of that year. It was a used car that was previously-owned by his best friend who had died and the widow wanted to sell the car. So Dad bought it and we learned to drive. Unfortunately, December 7<sup>th</sup> was also in 1941 and then you couldn't get tires or gasoline so we never did drive very much for the first few years.

bc: How did your family handle the Depression?

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BMD: Before he moved to the Burke Building, he started in the Union National Bank Building at the corner of Wood and Fourth Avenue. Then he moved from there to the first floor of the Apollo Building. That was torn down to build the parking garage and the YMCA. That was nice: that was the first time he had a street level location, and he sold greeting cards also. He had a nice store, but he was the only one working there. It was greeting cards and pens and the repair business. He would hire young men occasionally—friends of his would have sons going to college. And, later on, when I was going to Pitt, friends of mine needed part-time jobs and he would hire them.

My father took on extra jobs all during the War. He had machines that imprinted names on the pens. The local drugstore, John's drugstore, and the doctors in the community bought all these pens so every young man from Beechview received a fountain pen with his name on it. My Dad—at night, at home—imprinted all of these names on the pens because he didn't have time in the daytime when he was repairing the pens—other people's pens—and selling pens and desksets and Cross pens. (He did sell some more expensive things.) But he never did make a lot of money. But, at the time, trolley tokens were three for a quarter; ten cents for a special transfer. [That was] the way I went to college at Pitt and back again—20 cents-a-day.

I saw these houses being built during World War II. [BMD is referring to the neighborhood she currently lives in.] Otto Krenn used to be a disk jockey at KQV and WWSW and we were out here looking for stones. (This used to be all woods called "Five Acres.") And we were looking for stones to build a rock garden at my parents' house and we saw these houses being built.

I said, I'll never live in one of those...but I did eventually.

Then, whenever the man was building the houses down the street, I saw them from my kitchen window and I told my mother and Dad about it.

Mother said, We're too old to move.

Well, they moved and got all new furniture because it didn't fit in these small houses. New carpets, new draperies and everything. I had everything fixed: I had pictures on the wall and the lamps lit when they moved the last of the stuff on moving day: it was all ready for them to move in. The kitchen was all [set up]; everything was in the closets and the cupboards: their clothes and everything. It was not a difficult move for them. And my grandmother was with them—my mother's mother, Lizzie. It made it a lot easier for her later years because she was in her eighties.

bc: What was your schooling like?

BMD: Went to Beechwood School. My daughter went to Beechwood School. My granddaughters started at Beechwood School before they moved to Dormont. I went to South Hills High School.

bc: How did you graduate so young—at 16?

BMD: At the time I started, I could start before I was six-years-old. My birthday was in April and I could start in February. [Today] I would have had to wait until September. Then I had two double promotions: half of second grade and half of

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third grade. (That's why I don't know the seven, eight, and nine multiplication tables. I messed up with the double promotions and with measles and mumps those years.)

bc: You've led a very full life. When did you get involved in dance?

BMD: I always wanted to dance. I actually took dance lessons at 50-cents-a-lesson from a high school girl who lived near Beechwood School. Tap dance. My cousin and I went. And that was just less than a year. In high school I liked to sing too and I was in, at first, the girls' choir/chorus at South Hills and then the *a cappella* choir. In my Senior year we did every assembly program that came along. By the time I got to Pitt I joined Pitt Players and was in several of their productions: "Yellow Jacket," which you've probably never heard of 'cause I never heard of it; "Knickerbocker Holiday," (featuring "September Song.")

I wanted to dance, but we couldn't afford it. I wanted to take piano lessons, but we couldn't afford it. (And we didn't have a piano.)

bc: You've got one now.

BMD: Yes!

I was 32-years-old. [My daughter] was eight-years-old. We lived in the other house; and all three of us—[mother, father, daughter]—took piano lessons. Again, I took piano lessons at school for one semester at 50-cents-a-lesson and practiced on the neighbor's piano. I knew how to read music from singing in the chorus. That made it easier for me. [My husband's] fingers—being a football player, a guard—his fingers were big. After a year, he quit. I did it for two years and then we moved into this house.

[I wasn't doing much dancing] until my daughter came along and I took her to dance school. That's where I learned the time steps and everything else—dancing with her in my garage with tap shoes on.

bc: You weren't influenced by Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire?

BMD: Of course!

And Gene Kelly. Gene Kelly was my idol.

And Cyd Charisse is a fantastic woman.

But this has nothing to do with growing up in Beechview....

Anyway, I danced any time I had an opportunity and somebody'd show me—let's do this and this and this. So I did that and that and that.... Whatever they showed me. When [my daughter] started taking lessons, I would be there and watching everything in the class. I was too old to try ballet at that point, but I still liked tap. I just did tap until I sold Fountain Pen Service.

Oasis had started down at Kauffman's. Oasis is a lifeline. Oasis is a wonderful organization. I had been president of a company and telling people what to do and what not to do and telling salesmen who came in what I thought of their product or their company or their policy or their deliveries or such.... And, all of a sudden, I'm sitting at home and I'm "nothing" again. I'm...retired. So I joined Oasis and, the first thing I did was line-dancing. I joined line-dancing. I liked that

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really well. I had some very good teachers and the first teacher I had asked me to be in front and to demonstrate and to assist the class. I did that for a good number of years and then it got to be so boring: you're doing the same old thing over and over and over again.... (Nobody's getting any better.) So, Civic Light Opera Academy started a tap class for Seniors when they were still on Oliver Avenue. Then they moved to the eighth floor of the old Horne's building. I spent ten years tap-dancing there. So I was there tap-dancing until I was 80. But I did enjoy it, very much, all those years....

And, when [my granddaughter] had her first show—it was in the old Dormont Theater on West Liberty Avenue—I said, We're going to have to have three generations tap-dancing. So, we took one of the line-dances to "Mame" with the straw hats and such and we adapted it and put in some tap. So, my daughter and my granddaughter and I did that.

Growing up in Beechview.

The Girl Scouts...the Girl Scouts were at Beechwood School. Now, where I lived was, I guess, close to a mile from Beechwood School. The Girl Scouts were in the evening. There were other girls on my street. One family had three girls; one girl was older than the rest of us. [Four of us from my street] would go to Girl Scouts together. We'd walk up there in the night, after dark. We'd come home after dark. Nobody worried about us because it was safe to walk around then.

We went to the movie, the theater—there's some kind of a "home" up there now. We [used to] walk up there at night and see movies and walk home again. Or, I'd go by myself; and it was okay 'cause it was safe.

I was a section manager at Gimbel's—the Children's Department—for a short time while I was in school. At the time nothing could be returned until somebody approved it. (You just didn't go to a sales clerk and say, I want this returned.) You went to a department store—that's where you shopped—always at a department store. We only went to Kauffman's, Gimbel's and Horne's. I liked Boggs & Buhl when [my daughter] was small 'cause they had a child-care center there: you could leave your child for an hour or so in a safe place and go shopping. (That was nice.) All of the stores delivered. And, if you didn't want to keep the merchandise—for whatever reason—you telephoned and a truck came out the next day and picked it up and took it back again and you got a credit for it. It was convenient: you weren't carrying all these bundles and packages home in the streetcar. We went to movies in town in the summertime, maybe once a month, because they were "air-cooled"—not "air-conditioned" but air-cooled. But it made a difference. Mother and I would go and we'd have lunch at either Reymer's in the Jenkins Arcade right across from Horne's, or at Horne's restaurant. Horne's had a doorman for the people who came in cars, but we didn't have a car then.

I didn't feel poor during the Depression. We always had food. I always had shoes. And, at that time, you got a dress to start back to school. You didn't get a whole outfit. It was fine if I got a dress: I was happy.

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There are so many things. I can even tell you the prices of things—I remember them. Did you see those heavy, iron cars [on our tour]? They were mine. When I was five- or six-years-old, my father's sister moved diagonally across the street from us. There was a girl, two years younger than I, and a boy, six weeks older than I. And so, we played with cars. (I also have doll house furniture made out of that stuff. It's the ugliest doll house furniture you ever saw. Iron. Painted orange. I think it's in the cellar with my "Lincoln Logs" and my woodburning set and a couple other things I still have in a toy chest.)

bc: You mentioned to me that you had five generations of your family that attended the same local church. That's so stabilizing and so rare nowadays. But Beechview seems to have fostered that and encouraged it and nurtured it. This seems to be a remarkably stable community.

BMD: Some of it is; and some of it isn't. [The business district has experienced a lot of closings.] Brookline has such a good business district. Beechview never had anything comparable, but we tried and the buildings at least were occupied by different types of businesses which changed through the years.

bc: The time that you were a homemaker that you spoke of earlier—obviously other things were going on in your life as well.

BMD: I was active in church: vacation Bible school; I taught classes. Didn't play the piano well, but could play enough for the little kids, not for the older ones. I was a Girl Scout leader. I guess, to some degree, I was involved in the business: I can remember going to the Parker factory and the Sheaffer factory.

Before the Library [Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh Beechview] was built, we had a Bookmobile. That was so great. [My daughter] was little and I could get her books all the time.

We had a bus route back here when we first moved. The bus ran until eleven o'clock at night and it ran seven-days-a-week. That was great. But we haven't had bus service in I don't know how many years now.

bc: How has the city changed in your lifetime?

BMD: It's not as nice as it used to be. Downtown is a disaster. And that is such a shame. It would be nice if people would live there as they do in other cities, but they need a good grocery store for starters. And, from what I've heard, it's a shame that they don't have a good grocery store on The Hill. You shouldn't have to drive every place. We used to have A&P and Knapp's, a little local store—Mr. Knapp just died. There were so many different stores here and they would deliver an order—kids would bring it on a wagon down the hill. Even just a block away there was a little store in somebody's garage. You could always get a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk. Milk was delivered to the house. (It was much more convenient for the homemaker at the time.) I don't remember all the dirt that we have Downtown now. (I guess that's because they used to wash the streets regularly with water trucks.)

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I really believe that I grew up in Beechview at its safest and best time. (It was the right time to grow up—with so many more stores and churches and organizations.) I'm really happy I grew up in Beechview when I did.