

Interview of Kenny Sailors

From the Archives of the Wyoming Department of State Parks & Cultural Resources

Transcribed and edited by Russ Sherwin, April 10, 2010, Prescott, Arizona

- Subject: Kenny Sailors.
- Occupation: Basketball player, University of Wyoming, 1940-1943; military service for three years, then pro ball until retirement from NBA about 1951.
- Born: January 14, 1921
- Interviewer: Mark Junge.
- Interview date: March 30, 1990
- Place of Interview: Marriot Hotel, Denver, Colorado
- Topic of interview: Basketball; the invention of the jump shot; one-handed shot.
- Source recording for transcription: MP3 Podcast from Wyoming Dept of State Parks and Cultural Resources. (Add appropriate URL here)

Transcriber's notes: I have added some reference footnotes to this transcript where I thought appropriate. In most cases I have deleted redundant ands, ers, uhs, buts, you knows, false starts, etc. If I deleted an entire phrase, I have inserted ellipses... Where you find brackets [] I have added words for explanation, to complete an awkward sentence, or to make a best guess at a word. Parentheses () are used for incidental sounds, like laughter or asides to others in the room. Words emphasized by the speaker are italicized.

Introduction: By Sue Castaneda, Program Coordinator

Since basketball was first invented in 1891, the introduction of the jump shot stands as the game's most important change. Wyoming's Kenny Sailors was one of the earliest shooters of this remarkable shot. In fact, he's one of eight pioneer basketball players featured in John Christgau's book titled, The Origins of the Jump Shot: Eight Men who Shook the World of Basketball¹. In an interview with author and historian Mark Junge recorded in 1990, you'll hear about Sailor's history at the University of Wyoming where he became an All-American and one of the leaders of the 1943 champs, to his days playing professional basketball. This is an interview in two parts, so we hope that you'll download Part 2 as well.

(Music plays: "Rootin' tootin' cowboy.")

¹ John Christgau, The Origins of the Jump Shot; University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Kenny Sailors, Jump Shot Hero; Part I

Mark Junge: Okay. Today is the thirtieth of March, 1990. My name's Mark Junge and I'm talking tonight to Kenny Sailors, former Wyomingite—basketball player from Wyoming—and we're in his hotel room here, room 805 of the Marriott. With his—over in the corner there is his roommate, Lou—Lou, what's your last name?

Lou: Friedman.

Mark Junge: Friedman—Lou is news editor, or sports editor rather, of the *Anchorage Daily News*. Kenny, I'd like to go back, as I mentioned before, I'd like for you to go back with me a little bit, back to your youth, if you wouldn't mind.

Kenny Sailors: Sure.

Mark Junge: Okay. First of all, let's just do the basics. When and where were you born?

Kenny Sailors: Okay. Let's start out—people get this a little bit confused. I was actually born thirty miles over the state line in Bushnell, Nebraska. That's about thirty miles, or twenty miles, from Pine Bluffs—people know where that is—Wyoming. But at about the age of four, five maybe, we moved into Wyoming to Hillsdale, which is just a little place out of Cheyenne there, about twenty miles. A lot of other little towns in around that area; Burns, Carpenter, Albin, places where we used to travel to and play ball in those days. I stayed there up until the time I graduated from grade school. At that time, my brother graduated from high school there—my brother, Bud—and we moved into Laramie—my father wasn't living at that time—and my brother started into the college at the University of Alaska as a freshman. I entered Laramie High School as a freshman.

Mark Junge: This was what year now?

Kenny Sailors: This would have been about, let's see—I graduated in '39—in thirty, um—five. And I went through high school and then after graduation I went right into the university which would have been in '39, fall of '39, went to the University of Wyoming, graduated in '43.

Mark Junge: Okay, that's a pretty good outline. Now if we can go back, I was reading the *Denver Post* article yesterday, something about your learning how to dribble. When and where did you first touch a basketball?

Kenny Sailors: When I came to Wyoming, Hillsdale, and then—I was pretty young, but let's say six, seven, eight years of age, along in there is when I really started playing down there in grade school, at Hillsdale.

Mark Junge: Did you play on a dirt court?

Kenny Sailors: Uhh, yes. I learned, really learned to play on a dirt court. 'Course, with the school, we played in a little gymnasium there at Hillsdale. But my brother was a good high school ball player, and he played for Hillsdale, and we had an outside basket put up on the window. And he and I used to play, and he taught me quite a bit about basketball. I was five years younger than him and in the process of me playing him, lots of times, one on one and practicing against him, why I got frustrated not being able to shoot the ball. He used to kid me a lot, made fun of me, called me a little runt, and why couldn't I hit the basket? So I got to jumpin' in the air and throwin' the ball. Now I don't imagine that was much of a jump shot in those days, but it was effective occasionally. I got the ball up—up over it. And from that, on through the years, I couldn't tell you exactly how, it developed into the shot that I was shooting when I got into high school and on into the University of Wyoming, which is the one-handed jump shot that people tell me is the same shot that they're shooting today.

Mark Junge: So I take it that he just jammed this thing back at you, and you had to find a way?

Kenny Sailors: That's right. I had to find a way to get it up over, and of course out on a dirt court, your dribble wasn't too effective, because you go can off to the side once in

a while, or it'd get away from you, and so I discovered that to get the ball up over him I had to really get up in the air. So I jumped for height. I actually jumped for height before I shot the ball.

Mark Junge: Were you a pretty good leaper?

Kenny Sailors: I had a good vertical jump for a youngster.

Mark Junge: Did the track coach see this and want to make you go out for track?

Kenny Sailors: Yes. I think that's one of the reasons that I later high jumped and broad jumped both. I had pretty good legs, evidently, for jumping. And then I just carried it on into high school and the university, and I probably didn't develop it to any real perfection until I got into my later years at college...I didn't use it that effectively down there in those early years, I'm sure. I don't even remember, but I know, that's basically where the shot came from.

Mark Junge: But certainly, at that time, since you played a lot of teams around the state, you must have run into some surprised kids?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yes. I found out that I could get dribbled into the center of a zone defense, for example, and get my shot off. And of course, sports writers didn't call it a jump shot because that wasn't the big thing, in those days. The big thing along about that time was the one-handed shot. People in the West, at least, were changing over from the two-handed shot to the one-handed shot. So the fact that I was shootin' the ball with one hand was really the innovation that they saw. It wasn't the fact that I was in the air when I shot it.

Mark Junge: Well, let's go back to those times. Did your coaches ever say, "Kenny you've got to quit this. You're off balance when you're in the air—"

Kenny Sailors: Don't remember any specific high school coach ever sayin' [that] to me. Floyd Foreman was practically the only one I had at Laramie, and I don't ever remember him—I remember him saying to not just me but some of the others, "If you got a good shot I'm not goin' to change it. But if you're not hittin' the bucket

with a pretty good percentage, you're going to shoot my way." And he never ever did attempt to change my shot.

Mark Junge: You had told the *Post* reporter a good story about your dribbling and why you became such a good dribbler, and of course, I was watching you tonight. You're still an excellent dribbler. How and where did this happen.

Kenny Sailors: When I was just a kid, there in Hillsdale, we used to have a game and we'd come into the gym, and I don't know how many kids'd be in it, sometimes I guess ten or fifteen of us, and we'd get out there and—boys and girls both—and the name of the game was, as long as you could keep dribblin' the ball, you could have it. But if you lost the dribble, somebody'd take it away from you. I used to be pretty good at takin' the ball and dribblin' it around and in and out and over and under. You could even air-dribble. You could pick it up and throw it over a couple kids, but you had to go get it and keep control of it again. That was a little different from the game of basketball, but it was fun.

Mark Junge: Did you have—I asked you this before off tape, but were there seams in the ball? Did you have problems dribbling the ball? Did you wind up with balls that were not quite uniform like they are today?

Kenny Sailors: Probably the balls in that day—I don't really remember, but I doubt seriously if they were as—would bounce as even and were as perfect as the ones we have today.

Mark Junge: Which means you would have to have been a better dribbler—

Kenny Sailors: Right.

Mark Junge: —to maintain control of the ball. Is that why you went low?

Kenny Sailors: Yes. The lower you keep that ball—I learned that pretty early, when you get into traffic at least, the lower you keep the ball to the floor the better control you got. Because the ball does—well, any ball—even today there's little rises in the floors, even. All floors aren't [the same]; the balls don't bounce the same in certain

gymnasiums. And it won't take you long to discover that, and you got to keep low to the floor and keep good control of it.

Mark Junge: I remember one time in Denver we played St. Josephs High School, had a tile floor. What kind of floors did you play on in those days?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, just about everything. I played on inside floors. I played on cement floors. Yeah, I played on cement floors even when I was up in high school. We had those [...] when I coached in—when I first went up to Alaska, there were a few floors that were cement that the kids had to play on. But the most of 'em were wooden floors.

Mark Junge: What did your dad and mom think about your—

Kenny Sailors: Well, my dad passed away, but my mother didn't really get too involved with my—with sports. She didn't prevent me from playin', but we had to work pretty hard, all of us did, to make a living in those days. Mom was always busy and all of us were busy.

Mark Junge: Which makes me wonder why you became so good, because you would have had to do chores like most kids, right? Were you raised on a farm?

Kenny Sailors: We lived on a farm and my brother and I both had lots of chores to do, morning and evening, and of course there in the summers why we had a lot of chores puttin' the crops in, takin' care of 'em, takin' care of the animals, doin' it all. Yeah. And it was he and I, my mother and—

Mark Junge: Were you like the proverbial kid who dribbled the ball, bounce it to school?

Kenny Sailors: I was pretty near always—yes. It was interesting. I wasn't really—I'd go out and run a hundred yard dash, there were a lot of kids that'd beat me. I wasn't all that fast. I couldn't run a ten-second hundred. But, oh I'd probably run about a maybe a ten-eleven, or ten-eight or somewhere. But I never did run a ten second hundred. But I was quick. I could get started quick and I could stop quick. And I think

that's what, really with basketball, that's even more important than your straight speed. Flat out speed.

Mark Junge: Well, you know, when I was a kid we used to play with some kids who were younger than us, and these kids weren't always considered to be good, but there were a few that were that came up. And I'm wondering whether those kids really knew what they had. When was the time when you really saw yourself as being a good ball player?

Kenny Sailors: Oh—I don't really—as far as I'm concerned, probably not until I got into high school. I had a pretty poor self image, in every way up until the time I—sports did a lot for me in that way. I guess you'd call it an inferiority complex in some ways, being just a country kid. I remember when I came to Laramie, you know, I had bib overalls, and I fought with my mother, you know. I wanted to wear the waist pants, but mom, for some reason she didn't like that and she didn't want me to wear the pants, and even when I was younger she used to insist that I wear the knickers, you know, that come to my knees. And boy, I hated those with a passion. I don't know where mom got these—but a lot of kids wore 'em in those days, lotta kids did. And I wanted to be like the rest of 'em, you know.

Mark Junge: Did you get any cat-calls?

Kenny Sailors: I wanted to wear Levi's and, you know, have a belt on. It finally worked out. My brother came to my rescue a time or two.

Mark Junge: How many kids were in the family?

Kenny Sailors: Just my brother. Well, there [were] three of us, but my sister was older. She was married, actually, before, yeah.

Mark Junge: So you were sort of the runt of the family?

Kenny Sailors: I was the runt of the family, yeah.

Mark Junge: Did your brother protect you, take care of you?

Kenny Sailors: Uhh, I had a lot of pride about that. I never ever had any problems really, going up through school. I was a little pugnacious, probably, and a lot of it came from the fact that I was kinda, a little backwards, I guess, in some ways, and if kids pushed me why they knew I'd fight. I soon found out as long as they *knew* I'd fight they left me alone! You know, I didn't *have* to fight as long as they knew I *would* fight.

Mark Junge: Were you a tough kid?

Kenny Sailors: Well, yeah, probably not tough. I didn't bully kids. I hated a bully all my life. But I might fight a bully if he pushed me around, yeah. And I'd even fight my bigger brother if I had to! (Laughs)

Mark Junge: Now, why did you go over to Laramie. Because you moved over there?

Kenny Sailors: My mother wanted to go over and put my brother in college and there was no way he could have gone unless she had of gone. And she rented a big house, I remember, and we rented out rooms and she cooked. She boarded college kids. That's the way we made a living. And she did pretty well with it. And then later on she worked in sorority houses and cooked—she was a real good cook, my mother was.

Mark Junge: Why was she determined that you guys get through school? Did your sister also go to U-W?

Kenny Sailors: No. No, my sister didn't go to college. She graduated from high school. But she was married. I was a late comer. My mother was, I think, forty-four when I was born. And I wasn't the happiest event really, I guess, in the family, from what they say, when I come along. Kind of a surprise to 'em. But my sister was older. She was married in fact, when I was just a baby, or just born. She was already married.

Mark Junge: Was your mother's insistence on your going to college derived from, you know, maybe her parents?

Kenny Sailors: Yes. My grandfather was a college graduate from Poughkeepsie, New York, and he taught school in the Colorado Springs area right down here, and up in the old Cripple Creek country. He taught school for fifty years. I've got a paper at home where—when he quit, and they gave him a gold watch or something. He taught school for fifty years. That was in the day, of course, when—I used to listen to him talk, you know—when the teacher was the boss in the classroom and he had the backing of the parents for the most part, and if he had to he could spank a kid. He could just about run the show, in other words. He felt that—he was one of these believers that as far as education was concerned that a teacher couldn't teach unless there was discipline in the classroom, and that you could not allow two or three kids to be makin' a fuss and the teacher not be able to control 'em. And if you couldn't control 'em, then get 'em out of the classroom. That was his philosophy.

Mark Junge: Basketball in your day was not *the* big sport, was it?

Kenny Sailors: Uh, yes, it was! Basketball and football. When I went to—in Hillsdale, basketball was it. And my brother was quite a basketball player. Big man; six-foot-five, you see, so in those days a center jump was it. That ball came back after every basket to the center, and they jumped. So every team, any team that had a man as big as my brother on it in a little school like Hillsdale, why they could be pretty tough. All the plays revolved around him and the center jump.

Mark Junge: Now when he left, Hillsdale went down?

Kenny Sailors: No, I don't know about that, whether they came up with a big man or not. But I remember they went to the state tournament with him there, and that was a big deal in those days when there was just one big tournament for all schools, all sizes, and Hillsdale went one year.

Mark Junge: Did you go to the state tournament when you were in Laramie?

Kenny Sailors: In Laramie? (Affirmative) Oh, yes. Every year we were there. We finished—we never did win it when I was in Laramie, but we came in second twice. We were runners up twice.

Mark Junge: What kind of coach was coach Floyd Foreman?

Kenny Sailors: Good coach. Good old boy. Yeah. He worked hard with us and got us in condition, and he knew the game. Of course, he had it all. He coached football, basketball. I played football too, probably as much football my last couple years as I did basketball. And that helped me a lot, playing football.

Mark Junge: And track in the off season?

Kenny Sailors: And track, too, yes. All three. I was a three letter man.

Mark Junge: Did you get a scholarship to U-W?

Kenny Sailors: The only scholarship I had to the University of Wyoming was a—one of the lodges. What lodge was that gave me a scholarship—Elks, I believe it was. The Elks Lodge I think now, gave me a scholarship, and I don't know what it amounted to even. But probably some of the tuition and stuff. And I lived at home you see, until later, when mom kind of moved out of Laramie for a while. She was working up a few miles away and so I went to work in the Student Union Building my sophomore year, I believe it was, in Wyoming, and I worked there for my room and board for the rest of the year.

Mark Junge: Bussing tables?

Kenny Sailors: Yes. Well, waiting tables. In the Student Union Building where kids would come in and buy meals at meal time, Cokes and pop and that stuff. We waited tables.

Mark Junge: Now had the coach—Ev Shelton² was the coach at U-W?

Kenny Sailors: At the University of Wyoming, right. That was his first year, my freshman year.

Mark Junge: Had he seen you play in high school?

Kenny Sailors: No, I don't think he had.

Mark Junge: So you weren't recruited in any way.

Kenny Sailors: No. No, in fact, I came awful close to going to school in Utah. The only coach that ever recruited me was Utah, and I came awful close to goin' over there. Hadn't been for my mother I probably would have. Utah University, now; that's not BYU.

Mark Junge: Right, right. What did your mother say to you?

Kenny Sailors: She wanted me to go there—stay in Wyoming.

Mark Junge: Where she could keep an eye on you?

Kenny Sailors: Right.

Mark Junge: Okay. So then you started as a walk-on at U-W?

Kenny Sailors: Basically, yes. The only thing Wyoming gave it's athletes—at least as far as I'm concerned, but I don't think they got very much. Milo being out of state they probably did give him a little more. They would have had to, because he was a poor boy. He was our big boy. They would have had to give him some kind of a scholarship. But I don't think any of us really had—I don't know if they even paid—they may have paid our tuition. This Elks scholarship probably would have paid my tuition. But that would have been all. And then they got us a job.

² **Everett F. Shelton** (May 12, 1898 – April 16, 1974) was a well-known college men's basketball coach in the 1940s and 1950s. Shelton played quarterback for the Phillips University football team. The Cunningham, Kansas native coached 46 years at the high school, college and AAU levels and compiled an 850-437 record. He is mostly known for coaching the University of Wyoming Cowboys basketball team from 1939 to 1959. While at Wyoming, Shelton had a record of 328 wins and 201 losses for a .620 winning percentage.—Wikipedia

Mark Junge: Do you have any vivid impressions of that first time you walked onto the college court, the university court? Tried out for—here you are, from Hillsdale, went to Laramie, just this little kid—

Kenny Sailors: Well, I always felt I had to work hard to get there, see. I never did have the feeling that it was going to come easy for me. And it didn't. there's nothing really in life that's ever come easy for me. So I knew I had a lot of hard work ahead of me and Shelton was a great coach and he recognized that you needed to practice and my last couple years at Wyoming I had the keys. I could go in anytime, night or day. In the field house.

Mark Junge: Were you in there quite a bit, then?

Kenny Sailors: I spent a lot of time in there. Lot of it by myself. I used to line the chairs up about, oh, two, three feet apart the length of the gym and dribble in between 'em. Go through this, change hands each time, go down those chairs. Get to where I could just go and turn around and come back through those chairs. Teach you to switch from one—cutback, you see, on your dribble. Takin' 'em down this way, switch over and go this way. Dribble with each hand. And I used to drive in and practice that hard drivin' in layup, you know. Just to go as hard as I could go for the basket.

Mark Junge: When you started, did you have the same players that you ended up with at graduation?

Kenny Sailors: In Wyoming? (Affirmative) Yes, basically. Well let's see. The freshman team, our freshman team, as I remember it was Weir, from Green River; Milo Komenich from Chicago; myself; and then I don't recall whether Volker was there my freshman year or not. He might have not been. Volker and Roney, which was the starting five. Weir, Komenich, Roney, Volker³ and myself. That was the

³ James Weir , Floyd Volker, Milo Komenich, Lewis Roney, along with Curtis Gowdy, Willie Rothman, Bud Kerback, Bill Hancock and Clinton C. Butcher played in the early '40s at University of Wyoming with Kenny Sailors. —Wikipedia

starting five through sophomore, junior and senior year. But I don't think—I guess they must have been ...there although they were a year behind me. Roney and Volker were a year behind.

Mark Junge: But you started every year. You started on the starting five.

Kenny Sailors: No, I didn't. Now that's interesting. I'll tell this, and it's certainly no reflection on Ev. He knew me better probably than I knew myself. Interesting thing here. I made All Conference. It was the Big Seven as I remember in those years. I made All Conference all three years. Sophomore—you couldn't play varsity ball as a freshman, in those days. It was against the rules. So I never played varsity ball as a freshman. But our freshman team—and I can't remember who the others would be, unless it was Roney, and it couldn't have been on the freshman team—but we beat the varsity that year. Our freshman team, in my freshman year, we thought we were pretty good, so we challenged the varsity to a game and it got to where it was a real hassle between us. And the varsity, I think they really thought they could beat us, and I think Ev thought they could beat us. And so they had a regular paid admission game and made a big publicity stunt out of it and we drew several thousand people to watch that game, and we beat 'em! And beat 'em pretty handy! And I think that was the first inkling that people really began to have that we had a good ball club comin' up.

Mark Junge: Did you play in Half-Acre Gym?

Kenny Sailors: Yes. We played in the Half-Acre.

Mark Junge: What was it like playing in Half-Acre?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, to us, that was a big deal, you know. That was one of the biggest gyms goin' in those days. Yeah, it was one of the biggest gyms in the country until the field houses started comin' along.

Mark Junge: Today it's considered a cracker box, really.

Kenny Sailors: Oh yeah. Lot of the places like BYU and some of the others we played in, Colorado State, and some of 'em, they were pretty much cracker boxes compared to the Half-Acre.

Mark Junge: Now Larry Belucky says people were hanging over the rails [during] these [games].

Kenny Sailors: Literally.

Mark Junge: What was it like on a big night, big game? What was it like playing in there?

Kenny Sailors: Well, it was pretty exciting! For everybody. So many people in that gym and so noisy, you know, you just simply couldn't hear sometimes even the whistle blow.

Mark Junge: Did you ever have trouble with this hard drive to the basket and going into the wall?

Kenny Sailors: No, we didn't. Because that's what I liked about the Half-Acre. Some places you couldn't drive because of the size of the gym and the room underneath. But we liked the Half-Acre because there was lots of room. I could run right on off the court if I had to. And I made sure Ev kept everybody back; I didn't let 'em set on the ends, because I knew I was gonna be drivin' that basket if I got a chance! I loved to steal the ball—watch a guy that was a little careless, bringin' the ball down the floor, dribblin' a little high. I loved to time myself, steal that dribble, go for that layup. I loved that! Just like these kids do today! (Laughs)

Mark Junge: Something you told me today just stuck with me because I heard this when I was in school. Tell me about defense now. You said defense.

Kenny Sailors: That's right. Keep your eye on your man, concentration, determination, get down there and play football with him. That's what defense is all about.

Mark Junge: But you said something about the eye level.

Kenny Sailors: Eye level! You keep your forehead level with his belly button. If you're playin' good defense and he drives for the basket, with or without the ball, you should try to put your forehead right on his belly button. Keep your hands away from him.

Mark Junge: Why is that so?

Kenny Sailors: You'll have better position, better balance, and you won't get called for fouling. I mean, if he goes off you at an angle and can hit your arm, you've got a foul on you, either way. But if you can keep yourself right in the middle—and you can only do that by concentratin' on his belly button—and there's less movement there, I found. Don't watch his eyes, don't watch his head, his hips; watch his belly. There's less movement there than anyplace on his body.

Mark Junge: And he has to go—

Kenny Sailors: And he has to go where that belly button goes. And I've done this all through my college career and to this day a lot of people don't know how a little ol' guy like me can play such tough defense. I don't say this braggin', but I was—if you check back in the records, I was considered to be probably the toughest defensive little man in the league when I played in the NBA.

Mark Junge: Did this stand you in good stead when you got to the pros? Same principle?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah. You bet. They just couldn't drive me, too much, because I just didn't—I gave 'em enough room that they didn't get to step on me and I was always down low. They shot over, once in a while, especially that two-handed shot, you can't stop that. I had an awful time coverin' some of those great Eastern ball players that played in the NBA, and played even in college ball that shot that two-handed set shot. 'Specially behind the screen where you had to go around the screen to get to 'em and when you did they went the other way and then the guy that set the screen would be gone and you had problems.

Mark Junge: Kenny, today's basketball game is really physical. Was it that physical when you were playing?

Kenny Sailors: Underneath—well, anywhere. Yes, it was. I mean, I drove the ball—when I drove for the basket my intent was to make contact with my defensive man if I could. I knew he didn't intend, probably, to make contact with me, 'cause he's gonna get a foul. But my intent was to make contact with him if I possibly could.

Mark Junge: But this is a game that's played—and I think the *Post* mentioned this in the article—the game that you played was played ground level, so to speak. Today's game is played above the rim.

Kenny Sailors: Whole different ball game in that respect. We couldn't dunk the ball—

Mark Junge: Hang on just a second. Excuse me? (Tape goes off) Okay. You were talking about this ground level versus above the rim game. You couldn't dunk the ball, technically—

Kenny Sailors: Yes, I don't think there was anybody on our club, probably, on the starting five that couldn't have dunked the ball, even me. I had a good vertical jump. If we could have, we coulda probably dunked the ball. But we couldn't even do it in practice because we had glass backboards and if you put any pressure on those rims with the boards we had in those days, you broke the glass. So we had serious instructions about ever goin' up and grabbin' the rim or tryin' to dunk the ball or anything to grab ahold of that rim.

Mark Junge: But out of curiosity now—you're a guy that jumped and developed this jump shot. Out of curiosity didn't you ever want to see if you could—

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yes, yes. And I won't say we didn't, occasionally. But we were awful careful because we could'a broke that rim. And I've been in games when the backboards were broken and I know what a mess it is to have to shut the game down sometimes for an hour, an hour and a half to get a new backboard up.

Mark Junge: Could you go through some of the things that your college teams sort of pioneered? Some of the innovations of this Wyoming team, particularly the '43 team?

Kenny Sailors: Well, yes. Our '43 team was right in the middle of the, you might say, of the big changeover. I don't s'pose there were ten percent—maybe less, I have no way of knowin'—players in the country who were shootin' the one-handed shot, in 1943. And the most of those came from the west. BYU, Utah, Wyoming, California, Stanford; these were the only teams to my knowledge. And we got it, of course, from Luisetti⁴ who played here, AAU⁵ ball, played here in Denver, and he brought the one-handed shot in here to Denver, probably in about '37 or '8, along in there; '6, I not sure it is how early he came. Great ball player; great All-American out of Stanford University.

Mark Junge: So you're saying that you didn't pioneer this shot?

Kenny Sailors: Not the one-handed shot, no. Not the one-handed shot. It was Luisetti who pioneered that. What they give me credit for pioneering is the jump shot. In fact I have a clipping here that I'll show you from one of the New York papers where the great legendary Joe Lapchick⁶ who played with the original New York Celtics and coached in St. John's University for many, many years and retired from there—took a leave of absence for a few years to coach the New York Knicks when they first started out, then went back to St. John's and when he retired, he

⁴ **Angelo "Hank" Luisetti** (June 16, 1916 in San Francisco, California - December 17, 2002 in San Mateo, California) was a college men's basketball player and one of the great innovators of the game. In an era that featured the traditional two-handed set shot, Luisetti developed the running one-handed shot. Equipped with such an offensive weapon, Luisetti became one of the most dominant players in college basketball history. A graduate of Galileo High School in San Francisco who went on to play for Stanford, he became the first player to score 50 points in a game on January 1, 1938 versus Duquesne. Luisetti was named the second-best player of the mid-century (behind George Mikan) by an Associated Press poll of sportswriters and broadcasters in 1950.—Wikipedia

⁵ The **Amateur Athletic Union (AAU)** is one of the largest, non-profit, volunteer, sports organizations in the United States. A multi-sport organization, the AAU is dedicated exclusively to the promotion and development of amateur sports and physical fitness programs. The AAU was founded in 1888 to establish standards and uniformity in amateur sport. During its early years the AAU served as a leader in international sport representing the United States in the international sports federations.—Wikipedia

⁶ **Joseph Bohomiel Lapchick** (b. April 12, 1900 in Yonkers, New York – d. August 10, 1970 in New York City) was a professional basketball player, mostly known for playing with the Original Celtics in the 1920s and 30s. He is commonly regarded as the best center of his era, overshadowed (if anything) in his later years only by Tarzan Cooper. After ending his playing career in 1937, Lapchick became head coach at St. John's University, a position he held until 1947, when he took over the New York Knicks in the NBA. Lapchick coached the Knicks until 1957, leading them to three consecutive NBA Finals appearances (1951-53). He then returned to St. John's, coaching them until 1965.—Wikipedia

credited Luisetti with the man who started the one-handed shot, and he credited me with the man who brought the jump shot into the game of basketball. I don't know. I've never tried to say that I—when people started askin' me if I'd started it, how would I know? I don't know if I'm the first guy that ever shot a jump shot; I doubt it. But evidently, the shot that's being shot today is basically the shot that I was shooting when I went into the Gardens, went into the East, to the big arenas to play in those years.

Mark Junge: This is the shot where you go up and hang and release?

Kenny Sailors: Hang in the air and release the ball at the top of the jump, that's right. I tell kids you can't shoot it on the way up, you can't shoot it on the way down, but you should shoot it right at the top of your jump, right at the height. It's all wrists and fingers. You gotta get that, gotta get that gooseneck in it too.

Mark Junge: Did you surprise any people with that shot?

Kenny Sailors: In those days, yes, it was. Although, they still didn't call it a jump shot. I've got clippings at home where they referred to it, sports writers did, in all kinds of ways. They called it—some of 'em called it a leaping one-handed shot; others called it a—that shot-put type shot. Shot-put. Looked like I was shootin' a shot-put. No, I've got places where writers talk about me hangin' in the air. Hangin' in the air and makin' up my mind whether I'm goin' to hit the post or shoot that crazy, uh, I forget what they called it. Shot-put type shot, you know. All kinds of things they called it. They never referred to it as a jump shot until later.

Mark Junge: No comment from the referees in the game at that time about that shot? I mean, you never got called for travelling?

Kenny Sailors: Don't recall getting called for travelling very much. I did have some problems when I went into the NBA with the first coach that I played for, and that was

“Dutch” Dehnert⁷, an old time—in fact, he was one of those Original Celtics who played with Joe Lapchick back in the ‘20s, and the early ‘30s. and they had a great team. I guess probably the greatest team that was in the country in those days, before the Globe Trotters started in. They called themselves the Celtics, and that was where the Boston Celtics name, I think, came from. But that was Joe, and Dehnert. Well, they were up in years, of course, those guys, because they were playin’ in the ‘20s and they’d seen me, no doubt, when I’d come into the Gardens to play. And Dehnert, I don’t know if he’d ever seen me before or not, but this was after the war. And my first, the first team I played with in the NBA was Cleveland. The Cleveland Rebels. And I’d just got out of the Marines and had come back to Wyoming for just, I think one semester or so, and then went right into the NBA that fall.

So when they hired me, it was the front office that did it. It wasn’t the coach. And he didn’t know me, really, from Adam, Dutch didn’t. When I got out there in the first practice and started dribblin’ and shootin’ my jump shot, and drivin’, he never said anything for a while, and finally he called me over to the side and he said, “Sailors, I don’t know where you got that shot, or who taught it to you, but I want to tell you something: It’ll never go in this league.” He said, “You’re gonna have to develop a good two-handed set shot.” And, of course, everybody in the East shot set shots at that time. And I could see where he understood and believed that. They thought—a good coach taught—that both feet had to be on the floor when you shot a shot. And I can see that. And they also—he said, “We don’t dribble the ball like you guys dribble it—like you guys from the West,” or something. He said, “We don’t dribble the ball. When we come up the court with the ball we pass it back and forth.” And he said, “I want to see that ball passed more, and I want to see you workin’ on a good two-handed set shot.”

⁷ The **Original Celtics** (no relation to the famous Boston Celtics) were a barnstorming professional basketball team in the 1920s. The team's first dominant player was "Dutch" Dehnert, a 6'1" (1.85 m) standing guard who some credit with introducing the modern concept of pivot play.—Wikipedia

Well, I didn't have much to say. And as a result, I sat on the bench the first half of that season, and about mid-season, fortunately for me, they were not winnin' too many ball games, and Dutch—the front office sent Dutch on the road scoutin', which is just a nice way of gettin' rid of him. They brought in one of the guys who was with the front office who had been a former coach there in the Cleveland area. He came in and took over the club, and we started—I started playin' and couple other kids that hadn't been playin' started playin', that Dutch hadn't been usin', and we did pretty well! We ended up in the playoffs that year.

Mark Junge: And you were able to continue on with your style of play?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yes. I continued on. I couldn't play any other way! That's all I had, was a dribble and a jump shot!

Mark Junge: Going back to those innovations now. I think you mentioned more than just the jump shot. Underhanded free throw? Yeah, that was another thing. Teams in those days didn't—

Kenny Sailors: Everybody shot the underhanded free throw. Except us crazy guys from Wyoming. See, we'd seen Luisetti play and some of the people here in this area and others were startin' to shoot the one-handed shot. Free throws, set shots, the whole works, you see. But they confused, or didn't even distinguish between the fact that I was jumping in the air when I shot my shot—I didn't jump all the time, I didn't jump every time I shot. I shot a one-handed shot, too. But when I needed to get up over a man, that's when I jumped. Yeah. Yes, I still shot the—because I started out shootin' a one-handed free throw. But my old high school coach shot the underhanded free throw and he taught everybody to shoot it, but he never changed me. I shot one-handed, and I hit a good percentage of 'em and he let me stay with 'em.

Mark Junge: Did you influence the other guys on the team that way?

Kenny Sailors: I think I probably did, some of 'em, in my own high school.

Mark Junge: What did Shelton have to say about that?

Kenny Sailors: There were some—I could remember Strannigan⁸, he shot his underhanded to start with, and some of ‘em did, in high school, shoot underhanded. And I may have, way back in the beginning. I don’t remember. But by the time I graduated from high school I wasn’t shootin’ underhanded or a two-handed set. I was shootin’ a one-handed set and a one-handed—

Mark Junge: Did they ever keep track, Kenny, in those days of percentages? Free throw percentages, field goal percentages?

Kenny Sailors: Not like they do now, no.

Mark Junge: Could you say about what percentage free throw shooter you were?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, I imagine, I’d guess in college that our team was shootin’ over seventy percent, probably, as a team. Cause I know we never were beat. I don’t recall ever bein’ beat by not hittin’ our free throws.

Mark Junge: Yeah. Now you had a few other innovations. In Shelton’s system there was fast breaks, pick and roll, what about some of that?

Kenny Sailors: Yeah, Ev had the famous old Wyoming Weave, we called it, or Shelton Weave, it should have been called. And a lot of coaches didn’t really understand it in the East, what we were doin’. Neither did the referees. We had a little trouble with that until they got used to it. But we used to run our weave with two men in the corner, deep in the corner, two men on the side. Deep over, wide over, on the side. And with me in the middle. Or with somebody in the middle. And of course, my job was to either dribble part way over; or depending on where the defense was playin’, if he was playin’ real close and tryin’ to play denial ball, I simply dribbled over and handed it off, just like a football play. Just like a quarterback hands off in football. But if he was layin’ back, and wasn’t trying to deny my pass, and I didn’t figure he was in a position to steal it, then I’d pass the ball to

⁸ Coach Bill Strannigan, who succeeded Coach Everett Shelton, had just six winning seasons in fourteen years as head coach and made one NCAA Tournament appearance in 1967.—Wikipedia

one side or the other, then go set the screen, inside screen on my man, and let my teammate come around. Now if they switched, if they switched men, why I went, and we had a two on one situation. If they didn't switch men, he went down the middle, wide open. And of course then, after you set the screen, you rotated into the corner, there was a continuity to it, and then this guy come across and he became the middle man, and he'd pass here and set the screen and he'd come around and if he couldn't go, or couldn't hit somebody, he rotated into the corner and the corner man moved up. So you had a continuity like this, around the court.

Mark Junge: Well now are you saying that nobody had seen anything like this before?

Kenny Sailors: Not in the East. No. And a lot of places here in the West. They hadn't seen this type of a inside screen, continuity type offense, right.

Mark Junge: Is that—you mentioned some problems with the referees. Is that why—

Kenny Sailors: That was in New York, mostly. And they could have been right, to a point. We might have been settin' a few illegal screens, I'm not sure. We set it, well like Shelton used to say, you know, set 'em as tough as you can set 'em. You see. Whatever the referee'd let us do. And that's about right, in basketball. That's not dirty basketball, that's smart basketball, you know, 'cause people say it's a non-contact sport, but they don't know much about the game. There's lots of contact. In fact, the more contact you can make without gettin' fouled is what makes a great ball player. You have to make contact in the game of basketball with your defensive man.

Mark Junge: What about fast breaks?

Kenny Sailors: We fast broke. Our main fast break was a combination of Weir takin' the ball off the court and hit me or Roney or Volker, or Reese, when he was playin', and hit us on the run. When we saw either one of those big boys come off the board with the basketball, we were takin' off. And if we were open, they threw that baseball pass the full length of the court. And that was our fast break...Occasionally I would, if they got the ball to me in the middle and we had the two outside lanes

filled with a couple players, we'd go and I'd take it down the middle, and hit either side or go in myself.

Mark Junge: This was a line-drive baseball pass?

Kenny Sailors: Right. That was our main fast break was just clear the board, and they knew I'd be goin' and boom! Throw that ball. We got that pretty frequent until they'd start layin' a man back there, playin' a man back and then we couldn't use it anymore.

Mark Junge: You mentioned one time some guy threw the ball pretty hard and pulled another guy along with him?

Kenny Sailors: Jerry Reese. Yeah. He said he threw the ball so hard, some guy tried to intercept it, jumped way up in the air to get it, it was a little bit high, and it tipped him clear over. Komenich had quite a wing on him, yeah. He really did. He loved to throw that hard ball. He didn't try to put any loft on it at all. He just wound up and threw it like you throw a baseball.

Mark Junge: Was Komenich a football player too?

Kenny Sailors: Well, I s'pose he was in high school. He's tough. Big tough strong ol' boy.

Mark Junge: Did you get a lot of your points off the fast break, then?

Kenny Sailors: Not a lot. We got a lot of 'em off Milo playin' inside. Now we run this same weave with four men and put Milo inside. And in the process of runnin' the weave, he'd shift from side to side with the ball, and when he looked like he was open we hit him with that ball, and hit him sometimes and go by, and all kinds of things that you do of the man-to-man defense.

Mark Junge: Sure. Who was your high point man?

Kenny Sailors: Milo, I think, over our college career. If you look at the records I think Milo—I think I was about second. I think I averaged about fifteen points a game over my college—I believe that's what the book says. Somewhere around there.

Mark Junge: Now, your senior year was a year to be remembered. 1943. Is that a year that really stands in your memory?

Kenny Sailors: In lots of ways, of course, because we were getting' ready—all of us knew that we're—I'd already signed up to go into the Marine Corps, just the moment that, well, they could call me any time, but fortunately they let me finish the basketball season. They didn't even let me finish my college year out. The university did graduate me because I was close enough with my hours that they gave us the degree. It was a special ruling or something. But I came back after the war and picked up a lot of hours anyway, graduate hours and stuff so I had plenty of hours. But the war and everything, getting, you know, goin' on. It was kind of a hectic year. But it was a great year and a lot of fun. We had a lot on our minds, though. All of us did.

Mark Junge: Did you ever suspect that you would get to the point that you did, at the beginning of the season?

Kenny Sailors: I don't really know how we felt that way. We knew we were good enough. We thought in our own minds, because we'd been east before, and both years, all three years I was in college, as I remember, we toured the country playin' games with anybody that'd book us. Shelton told us ball players, I think my sophomore year, that he was goin' to start bookin' games with anybody in the United States who would play us. Didn't care who they were. AAU teams, service teams, college teams, anybody he could find. And that's exactly what he set out to do and we played—if you look at our record we played quite a few service teams. Good service teams. We played AAU teams. We played the top college teams in the country. Anybody! Same teams that're in it today, we were playin' 'em. St. John's; Georgetown; Arkansas; Texas; Houston; Stanford. Any of 'em. Didn't make any difference who they were.

Mark Junge: Well, it's different now that you've got your games set up a year ahead.

Kenny Sailors: Yes, that's right. But in those days, our athletic director and Ev worked together and I think Ev worked with him a lot and they just lined up all the games they could line up. And we played more games, if you look, than probably any college in the country. We'd play thirty games pretty near every year. That's a lot of games for college teams. Thirty-three games I think we played my senior year. I believe it was thirty-three games. Our record was thirty—oh, our record was thirty-three and two, wasn't it? What was it? Thirty-three and two?

Mark Junge: I believe so. Somewhere in there.

Kenny Sailors: Thirty-five games, would that be?

Mark Junge: Did you have trouble—did people not want to play you? Did you have trouble getting games?

Kenny Sailors: Well, yes, in some ways. Who wants to play a little team like Wyoming. They're not gonna come out here and play us. St. John's, Georgetown, Arkansas, Texas; they're not going to come out. They couldn't get enough of a guarantee to begin with, money wise. But they'd play us if we'd come there to play them. So we were playin' on their floor, too which made it a little tougher. Most of our games, except for our conference games, was on their floor.

Mark Junge: Did you get a kick out of knockin' these teams off?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we sure did. And the more we went and the more we won, why I think that drove us all. We got to thinkin' we could beat anybody! Of course, Ev kept tellin' us, you can beat anybody. You don't have to just play college teams. We can beat anybody in the world. (Laughs) Yeah. He kept tellin' us that. We believed him!

Mark Junge: You played semi-pro teams!

Kenny Sailors: Well, you'd call 'em that. We beat Phillips 66 my senior year. One game. They beat us one and we beat them one, and they were the national AAU champs and what was bigger in America at that time than AAU ball?

Mark Junge: And these are older fellas.

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah. They're out of college, all college, All Americans, great ball players.

Mark Junge: But there was of course the pros, too.

Kenny Sailors: No, there was no pros, really. No leagues as I—well, there was the old National League, in the East, yes. There was that old National League. And there was some pick-up leagues around the country, but nothing was really recognized like it is today.

Mark Junge: Now, let me ask you something. Did you guys get the big head when you read all your press clippings?

Kenny Sailors: (Sighs) I suppose we did, like any bunch of kids. Although I didn't bring a lot of my clippings. My wife used to—she hollered and screamed at me, even after I was married, I never ever—she'd get 'em from some other source, you know. "How come you didn't bring this home?" You know, and I said, I don't remember. I didn't see it.

Mark Junge: You were married at the time?

Kenny Sailors: Well, when I came back, after the war. I got married at the end of my college.

End of Part I of Kenny Sailor's Interview

Kenny Sailors, Jump Shot Hero; Part II

This is Wyoming Stories: Tales told by the legends who lived them. Produced by the Wyoming State Archives, the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources.

Mark Junge: I know you've talked about this before, Kenny, but I'm going to ask you anyway. Can you describe for me the feelings and the events that took place there toward the end of the season when you guys—when Ev Shelton took you guys back East and you won it all, everything?

Kenny Sailors: Well, o'course we went to Kansas City first, and we played teams up through that time and then we went to Kansas City for the Western Division Playoffs and as I recall, in Kansas City there was Texas, and Arkansas, Baylor, Creighton—I forget. There was quite a bunch of teams there that we had to go through before we won that. I think we played Arkansas our last game to win the Western Division. I believe it was Arkansas. In that game we were down ten or twelve or thirteen points at half-time or some time along about the half part of the game, and Shelton came in when we were in the room and we were pretty down. We were getting' beat, and we knew it. And he said, "Well boys, looks like this is it. I hoped we could have gone all the way, but it looks like this is it. I'll go back to the hotel and start getting' things together and you go ahead and start the game. I'll be back just as soon as I get everything packed up." And he walked out. Big ol' Komenich, he—we all set there for a little bit, and big ol' Komenich he said, "Aww guys," he said, "Let's not let the old man down. Let's go out there and win this one." (Laughs) I said, "Well, I think we're ready, Milo, if you are, and I think the rest of the boys are ready. Let's go get 'em! You cover the backboard, I can take care of the back court." And that's about the way she went. We went out and beat 'em by—I don't know. Not too much, but we beat 'em! Won the Western Division.

Then we went on to New York and Georgetown had us down, for a while in that game; they had us down. But we played real good ball, even our substitutes, Jim Collins, our sixth man; he came into the game. Volker played great ball. Roney, Milo, Weir, the whole bunch; and I remember this substitute, this sixth man we had came in and boy! He hit two or three baskets right when we needed 'em. And we ended up beatin' Georgetown fairly handily. But we were down in that game for a while. And then we won the National Championship. The NCAA⁹, of course, why I think the New York people thought they ought to get a second shot at us and we couldn't beat St. John's because they'd just won the NIT¹⁰ and there was big talk in those days which was the best tournament, the NIT or the NCAA.

So we said, well let's have a playoff. We'll donate the money to the Red Cross. Wartime, you know, and everything. So we talked to Shelton he—as I say, he'd play anybody! He didn't care! (Laughs) Anywhere! Anytime! Sure, he'd play 'em. And the school got some money out of it too. We got quite a bit of money you know, for all these games we were playin', for that day.

Mark Junge: Where did you play?

Kenny Sailors: Madison Square Garden, New York City. That's where the publicity was. That's why Ev wanted to go there. He knew this was where the publicity for basketball was. *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Look*—all the big magazines in those days, the newspapers and stuff that came out of New York City. If we were going to go into the big time we had to get the publicity, you know. So we turned around the next

⁹ The **NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Championship** is a single elimination tournament held each spring in the United States, featuring 65 college basketball teams, both conference champions and at-large selections. The tournament, organized by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), was created in 1939 by the National Association of Basketball Coaches and was the brainchild of Kansas coach Phog Allen.—Wikipedia

¹⁰ The **National Invitation Tournament (NIT)** is a men's college basketball tournament operated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association. There are two NIT events each season. The first, played in November and known as the Dick's Sporting Goods NIT Season Tip-Off (formerly the Preseason NIT), was founded in 1985. The second, the original NIT, is a post-season tournament played in March and April that is now called the MasterCard NIT; it was founded in 1938. In both cases, the final rounds of the tournament are played at Madison Square Garden in New York City.—Wikipedia

night and—Weir is the guy that really came through. Komenich fouled out against St. John's. We played St. John's who was the winner of the NIT—

Mark Junge: Now this was the next night?

Kenny Sailors: No, not the next night, but a couple, three days later, I think about three days. And we practiced a little against their silo ball and so forth and had time to get ready. Ended up, Milo fouled out of the game and the game ended up in a tie. So we played in overtime. And in the overtime, [Phone rings loudly] why Weir got three quick baskets. [Kenny answers the phone; break in the dialog]

Mark Junge: You were describing the St. John's game. Now it went into overtime and that's where we broke off.

Kenny Sailors: Yeah. In the overtime game Milo fouled out and of course, everybody thought, there goes our big man. There'd been—Weir had always felt he shoulda been the big man; been playin' inside. Shelton was smart enough to know he could've played the inside, but we needed— Komenich couldn't have played on the outside, where Weir could. Weir could play the forward position, but Komenich couldn't have played the forward position. But he could play the center and play it tough. Of course, Coach Shelton knew that, and so he had quite a few problems there, through the years, with big ol' Jim thinkin' he ought to be the inside man. So when Milo fouled out, Weir just says, "Sailors, if you can throw me that ball, I can get 'em." And I said, "Weir, I can get it to you." And he got three baskets so quick it'd make your head ding, and the game was over! Yeah, the game was over.

Mark Junge: What kind of celebration did you have afterwards?

Kenny Sailors: They took us down to the Billy Rose and his Diamond Horseshoe, that was the big thing in New York in those days. And they had everything for us. They even had the pretty girls settin' by us, and all the, everything but liquor. Of course, Shelton wouldn't—I don't know if he helped arrange that. I don't think he did. I think just the New York, the NCAA or whatever else. It was a big affair.

Mark Junge: Did you ever get a congratulatory telegram from Wyoming?

Kenny Sailors: Oh yeah. We had people sendin' us money and everything. We were getting' telegrams from Lion's Clubs, and Rotary Clubs and business people and they'd send money to us, you know, "Have more fun, enjoy yourselves!" (Laughs) It was kinda ridiculous! Wyoming people are wonderful people, I'll tell you, when it comes to their sports and stuff, they just really backed us. That was the fun playin' in a small school like that. Everybody knew ya'.

When we come back, why—when we got back the whole town turned out, of course, down to the depot. We traveled on that fast Zephyr train. That's the only way we'd go in those days. We got off at that depot there in Laramie why, of course, you just—the whole town was there. And the band was there and the fire wagons were there, and they put us up on the fire wagon and—the whole team, and I don't know—there was cars honkin', you'd thought everybody in town had got married! It was a riot! They let school out for a couple, three days, and businesses closed down. Everything was on the town; drinks were free—for everybody but us, of course! And I never paid for a haircut, I don't think after that, or a lunch or anything I wanted. You go in any store it was kind of embarrassing—they give it to you! You don't have to buy it.

Mark Junge: Was the governor there?

Kenny Sailors: The governor was there; half the state was there, in fact. Yeah. It was quite a deal. People really made a fuss over us. Probably spoiled us rotten, but—

Mark Junge: But you lived through it!

Kenny Sailors: Oh yeah. We lived through it.

Mark Junge: At that point, when you were coming back on the Zephyr thinking about it—I imagine you guys were celebrating—but did you think that there was life after basketball for you?

Kenny Sailors: Well, I was thinkin' about the Third or Fourth Marine Division and what had happened to 'em over there on the Marianas and Eniwetok and Guam and Saipan and Tinian, some of those places. Lot of things goin' through my mind. The War. We were thinkin' a lot about that in those days too, you know. We knew we had to go, all of us. Well, wanted to; but well aware of what we were goin' into.

Mark Junge: Right. Was everybody signed up on the team?

Kenny Sailors: Pretty much. We didn't talk a lot. Yeah. See, Weir didn't even come back with us, he went right into the Army. I had about, I think, a couple weeks before I had to report to Quantico, Virginia and to the Marines, and [we were] goin' every direction.

Mark Junge: Komenich, too?

Kenny Sailors: Milo didn't go into the service. I don't know if it was his size or what. Yeah, I think it was his size. He was a big man. They didn't take 'em that big in the service in those days.

Mark Junge: So you didn't relish any idea then of playing pro ball after—

Kenny Sailors: They didn't even have an NBA in those days. The NBA didn't exist. There was no real professional league, that I knew of, in the country. I found out later, on the East Coast they had this old, or somewhere back in the Midwest, they had this kind of a National League, or—I think that's what they called it. Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Oshkosh; Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Kind of a former AAU group that went into the professional end of it, yeah. Played some kinda semi-pro. Right.

Mark Junge: Did these people who represented these teams know that you were in the service? Because, if I were one of those scouts, I would be coming to you and say, "Hey Kenny, what are you doin' the next couple years?"

Kenny Sailors: No, they knew we were all goin' into the service. Yeah, it was nation-wide, the New York papers and everything, that we were goin' right into the service. They knew that.

Mark Junge: So how long were you in the service?

Kenny Sailors: Little over three years.

Mark Junge: Then, when you got out, did you come right back to Wyoming?

Kenny Sailors: Oh yeah. Came right back to University of Wyoming. And went back to school. Shelton got hold of me and, of course, it was kinda good. I didn't have anything lined out, you know. And by that time, I was a First Lieutenant when I got out, and then I finally ended up a Captain. When they mustered me clear out of the Marines I ended up a Captain in the Reserves. I stayed in the Reserve for a number of years. In fact they wouldn't let you out, really. Couldn't get out for a while, of the Reserves. Come awful close to havin' to go back into the Korean affair. Boy, I didn't want that. Because I didn't like those—I got mixed up in the political picture and didn't like that Korean or Vietnam thing at all anyway. They weren't fightin' to win like we were in World War II.

Mark Junge: Did you meet your wife after you returned?

Kenny Sailors: No, I married her at Wyoming. She was a Wyoming girl, Casper girl. Cheerleader! She was one of the cheerleaders. And when I came back after the war, she traveled with us on the trips. She got to travel. Ev was smart enough to take all us ol' guys [that were] married, take our wives along. I made him promise that before I told him I'd come back! (Laughs) Yeah. So she traveled with us. We had a lot of fun that year.

Mark Junge: What was her name, her full name?

Kenny Sailors: Marilyn. Marilyn Corbin was her maiden name.

Mark Junge: Corman?

Kenny Sailors: Corbin. C-O-R-B-I-N. That was her brother's boy I just talked with [on the phone], Milt Corbin. He lives here in town. And her brother lives—Milt Corbin lives in Casper, Wyoming.

Mark Junge: So your Nephew lives here.

Kenny Sailors: Yeah.

Mark Junge: Then you met her when she was a cheerleader at Wyoming?

Kenny Sailors: Right.

Mark Junge: Do you remember meeting?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, I think I met her in the Student Union building. Yeah. A friend of mine brought her over and introduced me, said, “Sailors, I want you to meet this cute freshman friend of mine from Casper.”

Mark Junge: You were a senior at the time?

Kenny Sailors: I was a senior at the time. She was a freshman. She was a Kappa Kappa Gamma and I was a Phi-Delt.

Mark Junge: Now in those days, that’s quite an age difference. Would your parents, or would her parents have approved of her going out with somebody that old?

Kenny Sailors: Ummm, well her mother didn’t object. She had one aunt that objected a little. One of her aunts, a grand ol’ gal, but she thought she was a little—she [shouldn’t be] goin’ with any boy, you know, that much older than her. But then her mother was all for it, yeah. And her dad. Both of her folks worked on the railroad. Her dad was a—what do you call it? He pushed the trains around.

Mark Junge: Switchman?

Kenny Sailors: No, not a switchman. He—what did they call ‘em? When they—managed the whole line, the trains, you know. Keep track—

Mark Junge: Dispatcher?

Kenny Sailors: Dispatcher! Okay, that’s the word. He was a dispatcher, and her mother was a telegrapher. She sent the wireless, that sort of thing. She did all this.

Mark Junge: What did they think about you playing basketball?

Kenny Sailors: They approved of it, yeah. They approved of it.

Mark Junge: Did you guys have a long drawn-out romance, or did you get married right away?

Kenny Sailors: Just during that year. I knew her through that year, um hm. And then I didn't marry her then until after I'd got into the Marines and came out of the Marine Corps as a Second Lieutenant. I came back to Wyoming and we were married and went to San Diego and slept on park benches for two nights 'fore we could find an apartment. Didn't even have a hotel room. You talk about crowded towns! We literally couldn't find a place to sleep anywhere. We had to walk the streets to find a place to stay. Marine Corps made no provisions for married couples in those days.

Mark Junge: Well, marriages, especially marriages, had an opportunity to dissolve when there was that much separation. Were you constantly coming back on leave to—

Kenny Sailors: Well, I was away from her for quite a while there. We lived together for a while before I shipped out overseas and then. Yeah, I was overseas probably about two years.

Mark Junge: That's tough!

Kenny Sailors: Yeah, it's tough goin'.

Mark Junge: You bet. So when you come back, now, what are your plans after you come back from the service?

Kenny Sailors: When I came back, Shelton got hold of me, and while I was getting' mustered out up at Farragut, Idaho, gettin' out of the Marines, why he got hold of me and talked me into comin' back to Wyoming. Said, they'll give you another year of eligibility because you were cut short part of a year your senior year, and you never played as a freshman, so you have a year and—now freshmen could play, I guess, at that time. So they gave me another, the rest of that year, at least. So I

came back and the season was already underway and they'd played several games when I came back that year. But Komenich was there; Weir was there. He'd been overseas in the European Theater, and he came back, and so we had practically the same ol' team. And we won everything. We won the conference, the Big Seven, and did just about as well as we did before. Not quite, because they'd lost some games before, a few, a couple, three. Some of these—Utah, BYU, were a little tougher than they were back in those days, but—

Mark Junge: Things changed after the war. So you guys were not exactly the Fair Haired Boys then any longer. There were other teams coming up.

Kenny Sailors: Yeah. There were other teams. But we had a good season. We won the Conference, and we were rated either tops—I think we were rated number one in the nation that year, but they wouldn't let us play in the NCAA because I was a graduate student; so was Weir. Being graduate students—and the university would have known that, they wouldn't have graduated—wouldn't have had to if they'd have known I was comin' back, you see. They could have just held up my diploma and said, well, you've got a quarter yet to go and we'll give you a diploma when you come back and finish it, see. Been perfectly alright. So they didn't let us in the tournament that year. We were kind of disappointed. I did make—I made All-American that year, of course. Made all the teams of All-American that year too.

Mark Junge: We also forgot to mention your Most Valuable. When did that occur?

Kenny Sailors: Well, I made the MVP when we won the NCAA, yeah, I made the MVP in that year.

Mark Junge: Was that a thrill for you? Obviously.

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah. And I won the basketball Sullivan Award, which was a big thing in that day; I don't know if it is anymore or not. And I won the Helms Award, and I won the Chuck Taylor Award. I won quite a few of the awards.

Mark Junge: Helms? H-E-L-M-S? (affirmative) Looking back on those four years that you played, do any incidents, humorous incidents, stick out in your mind? Things that you really look back at and you really laugh about? I mean, I can think back on my college baseball days and think of some really dumb things that took place that make me laugh every time I think of 'em.

Kenny Sailors: Oh—'course that thing with Ev. When we look back on it now what he pulled on us, you know.

Mark Junge: Was there a team joker?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah. We had this guy Reese... He was a real joker. He was a young guy, but he was always pullin' some kind of a crazy thing, you know. He didn't play all that much his sophomore year, but he was quite a joker. We really enjoyed him. He was a great little ball player. After I left he was the mainstay there at Wyoming. They went to the—I think they got to the sixteen once, or something like that, in the NCAA.

Mark Junge: I think—Lou, you're going to have to ask him questions about puttin' hot stuff in jocks, and short-sheetin' people, but I imagine some of that kind of stuff went on!
(All laugh)

Kenny Sailors: Well, I'll tell you one of the things that's kinda funny. We liked to play poker. Big ol' Komenich got us to doin' that. Shelton wouldn't allow it. He told us, "Never! Don't want any of you *ever* playin' poker. You're a team, and I don't want you fightin' over money!" That was his philosophy. But Milo liked to play, so we'd play with him. There wasn't a lot of money in those days, and Milo's one of these guys, he didn't like to lose at poker, and one time he lost in a poker game, and—[we're] not talkin' about big money. He probably lost a dollar and a half, at least, and that was a lot of money in those days. Pennies and nickels, you know. And he kicked the table, 'bout like that, he kicked that table over and half the cards and most of the money went out the open window down seventeen stories!
(All laugh) And somehow Shelton found out about it, I don't know, we probably

got reported, I don't know. People pickin' up money on the street. And he found out we were playin' poker and boy! I'll tell you—he had a way of puttin' the skids to us. That old boy was tough.

Mark Junge: This was in New York?

Kenny Sailors: This was in New York, yeah. We always stayed in the Hotel Paramount. It was just a block off Times Square. We'd go in there in those early days when Ned Irish who was general manager of Madison Square Garden—they really took care of us. He'd meet us, Ned Irish himself would meet us at the depot and pick us up and have limousines for us and take us to the hotel. Everything was arranged. Now he'd say, now there's a this goin' on tonight, there's a boxin' match goin' on tonight, there's a musical goin' on here or there, there's something goin' on—everything goin' on in town he had a list of it. Whaddya want to go to? He had tickets for everything. You name it. Anything you want to go to.

Mark Junge: Ed Irish?

Kenny Sailors: Ned Irish. Ned. He did a lot for the game of basketball. Probably never got much credit for it. He promoted the NIT. He really promoted the first NCAA that came into New York to play in the Garden. Of course, he was the general manager of the Garden, so he was promoting his business, but I mean, he still promoted basketball in a big way, and the publicity that went with it. I've never seen him given that much credit, have you, Lou?

(Lou responds) Well, in the NBA a bit. He owned the Knicks, too.

Kenny Sailors: Yeah, he owned the Knicks. But he always kinda stayed in the background, didn't he. He never tried to—yeah. Big ol' boy. We could go to him, you know, personally. I could walk right up to him, “Mr. Irish, could I get a couple tickets to the boxin' match?” One time we went to the—what's the big musical there? Where you'd have to dress so fancy to go to? In New York City?

Lou: New York City Music Hall?

Kenny Sailors: Yeah. Boy! I mean, people had top coats and they were really dressed swanky. And here a bunch of us basketball players walked in there with our sweaters on and sat down. Everybody settin' around with tuxedos on, you know. Women with long skirts, and those people up there on the stage playin'. Music Hall—I forget what they call it.

Mark Junge: Probably Radio City Music Hall.

Kenny Sailors: Probably was. And we'd go see the chorus girls, of course, when we'd get the chance, anything you'd want to see. It was fun for a bunch of country kids never been out of the state of Wyoming, you know.

Mark Junge: Now, you're here tonight, I mean, you're here this weekend for the NCAA and all the celebrations and I'm taking a lot of your time here, but you've seen these games on TV. The Sweet Sixteen and so forth and so on. There's been lots of talk and probably always will be by people who are basketball aficionados as to what—if those guys in your day could've played on the same floor as these guys here. In fact I've gotten into those kind of fights with people.

Kenny Sailors: Well, you have to talk about the rules, first. That would make a lot of difference right there. I think one of the biggest changes in the whole game has been the dunkin'. Everybody wants to dunk the ball today. I'm not talkin' about big men wantin' to dunk. Everybody—the point guard wants to dunk the ball if he can. He doesn't want to go in for a layup off the boards like we did, he wants to chunk it down in there. And of course that's where a lot of these offensive fouls are comin' from today, you see. They never think about stoppin' like we did, or like I did, and goin' straight up for that jump shot, and not makin' that contact with that guy. Not takin' any chance in a close game of getting' the offensive foul.

But that probably had as much to do with it, and then the narrow lane, see they called it the key in those days, and it would look like a key when it comes up there about six feet wide then goes around that big circle where the free throw line is, it looked like a key. So they called it the key. Then they widened that out, you

know, about twice that wide. You couldn't stand—in that day you could stand in there all night, you see. No three second rule. And so you put a—the big men we had were big men in the sense that they were a lot heavier. You could put a three-hundred pounder in there and some of 'em were. Two hundred eighty, two hundred ninety pounds, seven foot tall, six foot eleven, and Don Otten¹¹ of Bowling Green, probably three hundred and ten pounds and seven foot one. Well, now you set him in there and he was all man, he wasn't just a big clown. I know; I ran into him one time. He just put a knee up and broke three, four of my ribs here; pulled 'em loose from the sternum. (Laughs) I had to wear a mask over my chest just to play ball for the rest of the season.

Mark Junge: Who was this? Bob Otten?

Kenny Sailors: Otten, from Bowling Green. Don Otten. But when he was in there or big Mikan¹² from De Paul, if he was in there, of course, why they just walk a tall man right off under the court. They just, you just walk right up against him and just keep walking, you know, just walk around to the basket. And the position was everything and if you want to get around a guy like Mikan or Otten, why you had to pretty near run around the bench to get around in front of him. (Laughs) It was a different game. Lot of shovin' and pushin' and muscling 'em over, just like they do now, to a large extent, but what I'm sayin' is, Otten or Mikan couldn't have gone out into the corner and shot a twenty foot jump shot. Well, they didn't even shoot jump shots, in those days, but they couldn't have done it anyway, because they were too big; too heavy. By the same token, without that jump shot, lot of

¹¹ **Donald F. Otten** (April 18, 1921–September 18, 1985) was an American professional basketball player. A 6'10" center from Bellefontaine High School (Ohio) and Bowling Green State University, Otten began his professional career in 1946 with the Tri-Cities Blackhawks of the National Basketball League.—Wikipedia

¹² **George Lawrence Mikan, Jr.** (June 18, 1924 – June 1, 2005), nicknamed **Mr. Basketball**, was an American professional basketball player for the Chicago American Gears of the National Basketball League (NBL) and the Minneapolis Lakers of the NBL, the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). Invariably playing with thick, round spectacles, the 6 ft 10 in 245 lb. Mikan is seen as one of the pioneers of professional basketball, redefining it as a game of so-called big men with his prolific rebounding, shot blocking and his talent to shoot over smaller defenders with his ambidextrous hook shot, result of his own Mikan Drill.—Wikipedia

these guys today, these big tall bean pole type guys, without that turn around jumper now, just what would they have inside there today? They don't shoot hook shots like Mikan did, like Otten did.

Mark Junge: Well let's just say pure physical ability now. If the rules were the same for both eras, and they could bring these guys together, start 'em out together and start, the coach could start sorting 'em out as to who would make it?

Kenny Sailors: Well, 'course today, I don't see how in the world you could—like I talked with Ray Meyer¹³ one time about—he was pretty good friend of mine... 'bout Joey's, his boy's, players and stuff, and he said, "Kenny," he said, "I don't know what you do this day and age when you got a man six-foot-eleven; he can play point guard, or he can go inside, play post, he can go out to the corner and play forward, shoot a thirty-foot jumper if he needs to; he can do it all. I don't know what you do with 'em except get another one just like him." He says, "That's what we're tryin' to do here in DePaul. How do you defense a six-foot-eleven inch guy that can shoot a jump shot, outside, from thirty-foot, come inside and shoot hook shots or turnaround jumpers, or can drive the ball on you. How do you defense him?"

Mark Junge: Well let's go back to you, though. Say you could turn the old clock back forty five years. How would you fare if they were playing today's game?

Kenny Sailors: Probably just about like the little men that's in the league today. I mean, I'd have to be fast, and quick and play tough defense, and set up everything, and get a lot of assists, and probably wouldn't expect to be high point man. Quite a few of the games in my day I did a lot of the scorin'. Komenich and I would do a lot of it. But our whole team scored. We had guys, on any given night any one of 'em could score.

Mark Junge: Do you think you could make the adjustment and be a scorer, a point —?

¹³ **Raymond Joseph Meyer** (December 18, 1913 – March 17, 2006) was an American men's collegiate basketball coach from Chicago, Illinois. He was well-known for coaching DePaul University from 1942 to 1984, compiling a 724–354 record. Meyer coached DePaul to 21 post-season appearances (13 NCAA, eight NIT).—Wikipedia

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah, I think I could. I don't see why we'd have any trouble with it. The kids I saw in my day—now we didn't have a lot of Blacks in the league in that day. We had a few, but not too many. The Blacks have made a big change in the game. And we didn't have weights back in those days to help with so much of this stuff. These kids develop their arms and legs; they've got a lot of strength, upper arm, upper body strength. Legs, you know, that they can—their vertical jumps is unbelievable. Training programs are better, no question about it. Lot of things are better today, in that respect than we had back in our day.

Mark Junge: Right. Now what happened after you got out of the University of Wyoming finally? Did you go into the pros at that time?

Kenny Sailors: Yeah, I went into the pro ball. And at the same time I started goin' up into Jackson Hole, and I managed Jackson Lake Lodge before they built the big new lodge. Old, great big log structure, fifty or a hundred outside cabins, I don't remember how many we had. It was the biggest lodge in probably the whole country. And Boky and I—Marilyn and I—I call her Boky now, but it's her nickname—

Mark Junge: How do you spell 'Boky'?

Kenny Sailors: B-O-K-Y. And Marilyn and I managed that for a couple of years before we bought this place of our own up there. We bought the Heart-6 ranch in Jackson Hole and started up in the guest ranch business ourselves, and the big game guiding and outfitting.

Mark Junge: Were you playing ball at the same time?

Kenny Sailors: Uh, for a while, I [was], yes, while I was managing Jackson Lake Lodge, I was comin' back and playing ball. In the summer time. Just in the summer time.

Mark Junge: Can you real quickly tick off the teams you played for?

Kenny Sailors: Uh, started out with Cleveland. They just lasted the year out. Cleveland Rebels they were called in those days. And then I went with—they sold the franchise to

um—let's see: where did I go first? I went with Philly for just a little bit, Philadelphia; I think Fulks¹⁴ tried to get me down there. He wanted to play with me again, and, but I didn't get along too well with Philly, with that setup. So from there I went right to Providence, which is a part of the Boston franchise.

Mark Junge: What were they called? Providence—

Kenny Sailors: Providence Steam Rollers. And I played two years with them, and then I came to Denver. Because they gave up their franchise. They didn't—the Steam Rollers went out of business and so I went to Denver. They didn't even finish the season out.

Mark Junge: Now this was the Denver—

Kenny Sailors: Denver Nuggets. And then from then I went back with Boston for that year and then Auerbach¹⁵ traded me and another fella to Baltimore. I actually finished up with Baltimore.

Mark Junge: The Baltimore Bullets?

Kenny Sailors: The Baltimore Bullets.

Mark Junge: You were with the Celtics then the bullets? Then what happened? That was it?

Kenny Sailors: That was it.

Mark Junge: Why was that the end of it, now?

¹⁴ **Joseph Franklin "Jumping Joe" Fulks** (October 26, 1921 - March 21, 1976) was the first scoring champ of Basketball Association of America, the forerunner of today's NBA, and also the first to reach 1,000 points in a career. He won a championship in the league's first season, with the Philadelphia Warriors.—Wikipedia

¹⁵ **Arnold Jacob "Red" Auerbach** (September 20, 1917 – October 28, 2006) was a basketball coach of the Washington Capitols, the Tri-Cities Blackhawks, and the Boston Celtics. After he retired from coaching, he served as president and front office executive of the Celtics until his death. As a coach, he won 938 games (a record at his retirement) and nine National Basketball Association (NBA) championships (surpassed only by Phil Jackson). As general manager and team president of the Celtics, he won an additional seven NBA titles, for a grand total of 16 in a span of 29 years, making him one of the most successful team officials ever in the history of North American professional sports.—Wikipedia

Kenny Sailors: Well, I was twenty—nearly twenty-seven, twenty-six when I went into the NBA; I wasn't twenty-one or twenty-two. And I'd already played five years, startin' my sixth year, I think, when I got out of it.

Mark Junge: Kenny was this your decision, or did somebody just say we won't be able to use you next year?

Kenny Sailors: Well, to some extent it was mine. They released me, made me a free agent like they do a lot of these baseball players today. And I just chose not to try to play anymore. I figured I wanted to get goin' in my business, and we were already set up and startin' to get goin' and so I just give it up.

Mark Junge: And so you were in there a total of what—four, five—

Kenny Sailors: They gave me eight years when I retired. I'm retired now by the NBA, incidentally. But they gave me eight years because they added my three years in the military. They gave me three years in the military and five years of—I didn't get that last—part of that last year that I had.

Mark Junge: How do you look back on those pro years, as say, compared to your college years? Were they—

Kenny Sailors: Oh, in many ways they weren't as enjoyable. In those days the league was tough because there was so many franchises—there was only two teams that I can think of that started out in those days that still have a franchise today. I mean, the same names now, but they didn't go under and have to come back. The New York Knicks, and um, Boston. Was the only two. The whole rest of 'em went under at some point. They went under. When you were with 'em, when you were with the teams when they went under, the way it worked is, they put the names of the team in a hat, in New York, and they came in and drew it out of the hat. If a team wanted you, they'd come in and draw out of the hat and pick up your contract. Whoever they got, that's who they had to take.

Mark Junge: What was your salary in those days?

Kenny Sailors: Same as what you had when you—with the other team you played with. They had to pay your salary.

Mark Junge: Which was how much, in those days?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, a little man, I made seventy-five hundred, eight thousand, tops that I made. And I'd say the average little man probably made five. From four to five. The average big man would make maybe from nine to eleven, and the very tops, which was Mikan, he was Mister Big in those days, he made fourteen.

Mark Junge: What was your point average in those days? For the pros. Do you remember?

Kenny Sailors: I did pretty good a couple years. I finished eighth in the league twice in scoring, which for a little man wasn't too bad. And I finished second one year in assists, in the league. Then I made the All-Pro selection once.

Mark Junge: What year was that?

Kenny Sailors: That was '47—48 I believe it was.

Mark Junge: The only honor, then, that you haven't had in basketball is Hall of Fame, right?

Kenny Sailors: That's about it.

Mark Junge: What do you think about that.

Kenny Sailors: I think the reason that I haven't made it—several reasons, and Lou talked about this a lot. He really was the guy that got me started thinkin' about it. I never gave it a thought, up in Alaska, you know. (Laughs) I'm seventy years old; I'm not thinkin' about those things. Big game guide. But he started me thinkin' about it, in fact he started, kinda started the ball rollin' himself and got some people interested and they're workin' on it now. More of 'em in Wyoming, and him and some people around over the country. The ol' boy from DePaul, I think, Ray Meyer, will give me a lot of help. He has already. Some of the other older people too, that knew me. But I can understand it. I just dropped out of basketball. I dropped out of sight when I went to Alaska. Nobody heard—in fact this one letter

that's in this file of mine here somewhere, this old boy that followed me when I was in sports over in BYU, in Provo, Utah, he didn't know where I was. He wrote a letter to the Alumni Department of the University of Wyoming and said if Kenny Sailors isn't dead, would you send him this letter? And of course he mailed me a letter, a clipping that some sports writer wrote about me over in Utah in my ball playin' days, givin' me some plugs, and —

Mark Junge: Why did you leave Wyoming?

Kenny Sailors: To go to Alaska. Big game guiding and outfitting. That was the last of it. My first love, really, at that time.

Mark Junge: Couldn't you do that here in Wyoming?

Kenny Sailors: No, it was beginning to get to the point in Wyoming where the back country there and the Teton wilderness area where I'd done most of my hunting up in the headwaters of the Yellowstone, Thorofare, Yellowstone Plateau—It was getting to where these big outfits, the Sierra Club and other sportsmen's clubs were comin' in there with fifty to seventy-five to a hundred head of mules and horses, goin' through that country and stayin' in my huntin' camps and other huntin' camps too, and went up through my huntin' area and they were usin' my wood and usin' my horseshoes and—too many people! They were trampin' around over the mountains and it just wasn't good for the hunting.

Mark Junge: Kinda like Daniel Boone. He kept on moving west to get away from his neighbors—

Kenny Sailors: It's actually a fact. If you're gonna stay in the hunting business you gotta go where the people aren't. If you're gonna stay in *good* hunting, you gotta go where the people are *not*. When I first went into Jackson Hole back in the early days and started huntin' up there, the early '30s even, my brother and I, and later on in the '30s and the '40s, early '40s, why it was just a lot like Alaska. But today, there's just a lot of people comin' through that country. And I'm sure they're still huntin', but I think everything's on special permit today, isn't it?

Mark Junge: Some kind of permit, it seems like.

Kenny Sailors: That pretty much kills the commercial end of hunting, you see, when you start going on special permit. Business men can't—they gotta plan ahead, a year, six months, and they can't be waitin' to see if they're gonna get a permit from some fish and game department to come after an animal, you know.

Mark Junge: When did you leave Wyoming?

Kenny Sailors: 1965. I went to Alaska in 1965.

Mark Junge: I gotta get you to talk about this—we're almost out of time—I've gotta get you to talk about your basketball in Alaska. Now, you could play now!

Kenny Sailors: Well, I do, I do play. In fact I'm thinkin' about goin down this summer down to this friend that wrote me from over in Utah, he wants me to come down and play with 'em on an Old Timers tournament—They're havin' a tournament for old timers. I don't know where it's from, maybe all over that part of the state. But he wants me to come down. He says, "Sailors, you come play with us. We'll make you the captain, I'll guarantee you can play the whole game." I wrote him back and I said, "Lookee, I don't wanna be the captain. And all I want to do [is] just get in for three, four minutes!" (Laughs) I don't know whether I can make it or not. Be a lot of fun, you know.

Mark Junge: Are you still playing today?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, yeah, well, I play City League ball, occasionally, right there in Angoon. Anytime I want to play, on one of the—they have all kinds of teams goin' on there all the time, from little tots clear up to guys in their seventies and eighties, playin' basketball. Hard to believe!

Mark Junge: Where is this?

Kenny Sailors: Angoon. It's a little Indian village; Tlingit Indian village, about five, six hundred people—

Mark Junge: How do you spell ‘Klinket’?

Kenny Sailors: T-L-I-N-G-E-T. (Lou corrects: T-L-I-N-G-I-T. They agree on the spelling ‘Tlingit’)

Mark Junge: Okay, it’s a ‘Klinkit’ Indian village. Where is it?

Kenny Sailors: In Southeast Alaska, it’s on the—pretty much the southern, the southwestern tip of Admiralty Island. The town’s name is Angoon.

Mark Junge: And that jacket you got—

Kenny Sailors: That jacket sums it all up, doesn’t it?

Mark Junge: What does it say on that jacket?

Kenny Sailors: It says, ‘Angoon, Capital of’—Let me read it. It’s on the back there.

Mark Junge: Oh, here we go. Here we go.

Kenny Sailors: The girls gave it to me just before I left.

Mark Junge: This is a black jacket with a red, orange and silver patch on the back. It says, “Angoon, Basketball Capital of Admiralty Island” (All laugh)

Kenny Sailors: (Laughing) There’s only one town there! And that’s not a town, just an Indian village is all it is! Cute bunch of kids. Yeah, I really enjoy workin’ with ‘em. I’m coachin’ the girls team. And I’ve been there three years. We’ve come in second twice in the Southeastern Conference. There’s only four conferences, I guess, in Alaska, and in our division we come in second twice and I won the Southeastern this year. Went to the State meet in Anchorage and [were] doin’ pretty good. Won one game and then my little point guard broke her wrist. And she was about half the ball club, and so we didn’t do too well after that.

Mark Junge: What’s it like coaching those little girls? How old are these girls?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, they're high school girls. They range—most of those girls I had this year, I had two seniors and I had two sophomores and three or four juniors. Didn't have too many girls; think I only had nine girls that actually went to the tournament. I had about fifteen turn out, [out of] only about twenty-three girls in school. So fifteen of 'em turned out for basketball. (laughs) Lot of fun! They're a cute bunch of kids. They really are. Yeah. They love basketball. And the boys did real well one year. A friend of mine was coachin' the boys team and they did—they didn't do too well this year, they came in second in Southeastern, when my girls won it, but the previous year, the year before that, the boys won, and we came in second. So it kinda balanced that out. But the boys came in second in the State one year. So they did a little bit better than we did. Of course they didn't lose their point guard either.

Mark Junge: Is Alaska basketball crazy?

Kenny Sailors: Crazy! Ask this guy! (Referring to Lou) Especially out in the bush, aren't they? There's some of 'em don't believe yet that I played in the NBA, or that I played with the Celtics, and I don't try to convince 'em 'cause I don't blame 'em, you know. But most of the boys in the school do, because I've played 'em, nearly all of 'em, one-on-one sometime or another. I've only been beat once in the three years by the big boy that played last year. He was pretty tough. He was about six-four, and he did a pretty good job.

Mark Junge: Is this that kid you were talking about? What's his name? Robin—I mean, the All American, NAI—

Kenny Sailors: No no. This is a kid played high school ball for Angoon.

Mark Junge: Well now, are you teaching, is that it?

Kenny Sailors: Yes, I'm teachin' too.

Mark Junge: What are you—

Kenny Sailors: Uh, social studies. American Government, US History, geography—I taught English one year.

Mark Junge: At—what’s the name—is this the name of the school?

Kenny Sailors: Angoon.

Mark Junge: At Angoon High School?

Kenny Sailors: Angoon High School, mm hm. Yeah, I’m going to end up with a good retirement in the Alaska school systems, too. ‘Cause I taught for a few years when I first come up here because I couldn’t get a guide’s license. You had to live in the state for five years, and you had to work for other guides, and you had to go through a lot of rigmarole and take a written test and then wait a year and take an oral test. I don’t know if it’s that tough now. I think it is, just about. But it took me about five years to get my license. In the meantime, why an ol’ boy there in Glennallen, where I have my homestead up north, he found out that I’d played ball somewhere and he come out to see me. And I said, “I’m not a teacher. Don’t have a certificate. I don’t know if I could teach. I can coach, I’m sure. I haven’t done it, but I’m sure I can.” He said, “Well, [you] don’t have to worry about the certificate. I can get you a certificate. All we’re lookin’ for in Alaska today, out here in the bush, is warm bodies. We need teachers! And I need coaches! I need a girls coach and a boys coach. Can you coach ‘em both?” I said, “That’d be no problem.”

I didn’t know what I was getting’ into. So when I started out I was coachin’ both the boys and the girls. I coached cross country in the fall, both boys and girls. I coached basketball following the cross country, then right after basketball—the girls didn’t go into volleyball like the other girls teams do now, but the girls had track, then later on in the spring I coached both boys and girls in track, but I also coached the boys in wrestling. So we had a pretty good season.

Mark Junge: Now, are you getting out of basketball coaching?

Kenny Sailors: I'm retirin' from workin' with the kids, yeah, as much as I have. See I'd been out of it—when I got out of the Glennallen schools, that was back in 1971, and then this was the first—not the first coachin'—I'd helped out in Glennallen with the coachin' pretty near every year in some department; junior high, track, basketball. Wherever they needed somebody. But I wasn't connected with the schools. They just called me back because the kids knew me and they liked me and they didn't have a coach and didn't have the money to pay one, so I'd go do it. That's what it boiled down to. But down here in Angoon, they don't actually pay me a salary for coachin' down there. They pay me for teachin' and I just do the coachin'.

Mark Junge: When are you going to retire?

Kenny Sailors: This year.

Mark Junge: This is it. What's your first love?

Kenny Sailors: Oh, I love workin' with these kids. My first love, really, when you come right down to it, is huntin' and fishin'. I love it. I love the mountains, horseback ridin'—yeah.

Mark Junge: You're not going to give up on that?

Kenny Sailors: Never. No. I'll die on top of the mountain maybe. Or an ol' grizzly might get me, but—I tell Boky—I've had a couple fairly close, not serious close calls. Never really had a grizzly mad, chargin' me. I've had a couple crippled, and I've helped hunters to get 'em, you know, when I'm guidin'. I've never had any real close calls with bear, but I've been pretty close to 'em a few times. And she's always, "Well, now, you've gotta get out of the huntin' too." And I say, "Honey, lookee. Don't worry about it. An ol' bear gets me, he gets me!" After all, once in a while—one time at home, I was sittin' around the table ... in the lodge, and a bunch of women and stuff—I didn't know a couple of 'em, we were sittin' around—and it came out in the paper that—up in McKinley Park where some grizzly had gotten a guy and mauled him and killed him. And I realize now it didn't sound very good, and I shouldn't have said it, but you know, bein' an ol'

guide I read it and well, *how terrible it was, that bear you know, and they ought to go get him and kill that bear. They ought to get the whole country out and go after that bear and kill him.* And I said, “Well, you can’t really blame the ol’ bear, you know.” I said, “He was fightin’ for his rights, his territory, and you know, once in a while a man goes after a bear with intent to kill him, the ol’ bear gets the man! What’s wrong with that?” and that didn’t go over very good. And I can understand it. You kinda take that attitude toward it, really.

Mark Junge: Have you ever—now Alaska’s a good place to have one on one contact with a Kodiak brown bear or an Alaskan—

Kenny Sailors: We don’t have any Kodiaks up north. That’s one of the reasons—another reason I went to Angoon is because of the brown bear hunting. I wanted—some of my hunters were askin’ about huntin’ brown bear. So I’ve got set up now while I’ve been down there for brown bear hunters.

Mark Junge: You’ve never had this one on one confrontation yet?

Kenny Sailors: No. I’ve never had a brown bear—either a brown bear or a grizzly ever attack me. Never have.

Mark Junge: Now, when you get dudes—you get dudes from all over the country. These people talk to you about basketball. People in Alaska, apparently, don’t know so much about your basketball career. Does this sort of thing here, the NCAA in Denver this year, sort of re-awaken all of your—

Kenny Sailors: Yes, it brings back memories, a lot. I get with ol’ Jimmy Reese and we get to talkin’. It’s literally true, just what I said at the dinner last night. We can get together, Jimmy and I can, or Floyd Volker, or Roney, or Shadow Ray, or any of ‘em, that old team, we get to chattin’, or some of my old NBA buddies, and we can remember situations and plays and incidents that took place forty years ago and talk about ‘em and laugh about ‘em and know exactly what happened. But we can turn around and walk out of the meeting, we can’t find our car in the parking lot! (All laugh) So it’s a good sign we’re getting’ old!

Mark Junge: That's great! Well, it's been great chatting with you here. Really has been, Kenny.
I appreciate it.

Conclusion of Interview