Peg Meier: Well, Peter, I worked for the Star Tribune for 35 years, and, in the course of that time, I realized that I liked doing stories about real people, not the politicians, not the business execs, regular people who had some stories to tell. And, in the midst of that, I got to do some stories about Minnesota history. I was not a history major; I don’t know much about history, but I found that, if I could do stories about Minnesota people who did something amazing or interesting in the past, that was perfect. So, after I retired, I plunged into that and did a couple books of Minnesota history, and I enjoyed that ever so much, and I go around telling people what Minnesota has meant to the regular people.

Peter Shea: Can you summarize Minnesota?

Peg Meier: Can I summarize Minnesota? No, I don’t think I can.

Peter Shea: I was thinking more – are there things that you distill out of the work you’ve done, over this long – themes that seem distinctive or that keep coming up, maybe not the definitive list? You’ve talked to a lot of Minnesotans.

Peg Meier: And I don’t have much to compare them with. I grew up in Wisconsin, but I’ve been gone from there since 1970. But what I really like about the people I’ve gotten to talk to over the years is the honesty and the modesty and the “Oh, I didn’t realize that was a good story” – people who just need a chance to be able to summarize their own lives and tell me what’s been important. So often, people said, “Nobody really seemed interested in that story until you came along.” Or, “It’s so good that you were willing to listen to what I had to say,” and I think so often in our regular lives we don't pay enough attention to the stories that each of us has.

Peter Shea: Could you say just a little bit about the books you’ve done and the directions of investigation that those have led you on?

Peg Meier: The very first book I worked on is the one that has done the best over the years. It’s called Bring Warm Clothes. It came out in the early 80s. After the Bicentennial, I realized I wanted to put out a book about regular people who have lived in Minnesota, and left their letters, diaries, and photographs. The experts told me that something like this would never sell. There had never been anything like it. It wasn’t hard-core history; it wasn’t the governors, the pioneers, the men that the streets are named after. This was a book of regular people who left behind something that captivated my heart. It’s very subjective; it’s just things that I liked in Minnesota history. After that, I was pretty well stuck; I just loved doing this kind of work. And that book, much to everyone’s surprise, especially my own, has sold steadily since the early 80s. It has sold way over 150,000, maybe 200,000 copies – something like that. It’s amazing. So when I retired, I really wanted to do a book about children in Minnesota over many decades. I just plunged into the Minnesota Historical Society archives, Hennepin County archives, other county agencies, the Jewish community historical society – many resources to find interesting stories about children. I just loved doing that. That became this book: it’s called Wishing for a Snow Day – Growing Up in Minnesota. And in the course of that, I found a lovely little diary of a girl who lived on Summit Avenue, kept one diary, one
year’s diary that was just absolutely delightful. And this was published with my introduction and aftermath, because it’s just so much fun. And this little book became a play, at the History Theater. They pretty much used her diary as she wrote it. <Phone interruption.> It was called Coco’s Diary, and it did really well. So I have become excited about some of my books that have become plays at the History Theater. What fun! I don’t know anything about theater. To see something like this evolve into a wonderful play with music and great kids acting the part of Coco: it was incredible! I had so much fun.

Peter Shea: So, you’ve done some interview stuff too. Did you start out as sort of a Minnesota archive rat and move into interviews, or was that always part of how you were working?

Peg Meier: I was an interviewer before I started messing around in history. I was a journalist first, a journalism major at the University of Wisconsin, worked in Wisconsin a couple of years and then came here to the Minneapolis Tribune, and I found I loved it because as a reporter, I could ask pretty intimate, nosy questions – not crossing the line of course – but it’s fabulous to be able to sit down with someone, and say, “So, what about this,” and “How do you feel about that?” You know this too. Some of my friends accuse me of asking too many questions. They tease me, gently. They say what I want to do is sit down with someone and find out what makes them tick – ask them questions, get them talking. That’s totally delightful to me. That’s what I did for more than three decades to make a living – ask questions, write down what people had to say, make it into an acceptable length to put in the newspaper or in a book. It’s a great life.

Peter Shea: And when you started the historical work, did you continue doing interviews as part of the preparation for these books, or did you take a detour to archives and then come back?

Peg Meier: It’s a detour to archives, because most of the material is old. It was just fun plowing through old letters and diaries. I recently learned from a friend who works at the Minnesota Historical Society that the graduate students who are now coming to use the archives have a problem, and that problem is: they don’t know how to read cursive. They’re not taught cursive in the third grade, as I was. I would’ve thought they could have read it. The writing from the 1800s is different from today’s. It has many flourishes, some parts that take a little practice to decipher. However, not being able to read it – it’s always just a puzzle to me, and of course, most of history, most of written history, is handwritten history, until typewriters came along, and then, of course, computers, but written history is what most of us have left.

Peter Shea: How do you know when you’ve got a live story? You’re reading along in the archives, going through various things, and you suddenly decide, “This is something I have to use” or “This is something I have to follow up.”

Peg Meier: I can’t give you a list of criteria for that. What I do is: if it excites me, if it makes my heart pound, if I say “Oh this is really good. I’ve got to tell somebody about
this,” then I think this might appeal to other people too. I hope other people like this; that’s the only criteria. When I first started working on some of this material, there was an elderly man, probably about the age I am now, a professor, who was going through the archives working on Humphrey’s biography. He was going through each piece of paper separately, taking notes painstakingly, working file by file, box by box, all Hubert Humphrey material. What I would do if I see something in the index of the file that appealed to me, I’d ask one of employees there to fetch me that box, and I’d pick up a file and open it up, and if it was great, I’d want to yell “Whoopie, this is fine stuff; I can use this somehow.” Otherwise, I’d just close the file, look at another file, get another box. And it just drove him wild, because it wasn’t at all scientific. I was looking for something that would move me. That’s what feature writers – which was my job at the newspaper – that’s what feature writers look for, something that will move the heart.

Peter Shea: There seemed to be a sort of emphasis when you spoke about ordinary people, and I had the sense of perhaps a bit of aversion to writing about extraordinary people. Could you say a little bit about that?

Peg Meier: Yes, I think that extraordinary people have had a lot of opportunities to tell their stories, and I think ordinary people have amazing things to say. In practically every interview I have ever done, someone has given me a pearl of wisdom, something that I think, “Yeah, that is so true,” something that moves me. I really like people who aren’t trying to move the conversation one way or another, people who aren’t lying to me, people who are telling me the truth as they see it – perhaps much as you do, Peter. I like stories that come from people that haven’t been told before.

Peter Shea: My formula for the first 10 years was “I want to talk to people with lots to talk about and nothing to say.”

Peg Meier: I think most people have something to say. With a little digging, people want to tell stories. And everybody has had interesting things happen to them. It’s just whether they are willing to tell me about it, is what moves me.

Peter Shea: Did you feel like you were in the right place, making a difference, as a feature writer?

Peg Meier: For me, it was perfect job, and I got to do what I wanted to do, and I also helped people tell their own stories. I wasn’t covering the big stories. I covered a few of the big stories, like that Congdon murders in Duluth in 72 and other big stories, but mostly I was doing kind of behind-the-scenes stories, stories about people who, as I keep saying, aren’t ordinarily in the news, and I think those are very important stories to be told and to be read. I am regretful now the newspapers have dropped that kind of reporting; human interest stories are not given the kind of ink and play and importance that they were in the years when I was at the paper, and I am sorry that that is true. I think when people know what they want to tell to the world, we should be listening.

Peter Shea: It’s a function mostly taken over by obituaries in my experience.
So what is the case to be made for the kind of work you did for 30 years, as an important part of the newspaper. How do you think? I’m not saying there isn’t a case for it; obviously I think it’s terribly important. This is what I do for a living. I formulate the case different ways on different days. I am wondering how you see it.

**Peg Meier:** Well, I think these stories need some time and some care and some space in newspapers. Now there are human interest stories, but mostly it’s about celebrities, I’m afraid: people I don’t know and don’t care about. But the stories about regular people have to be so short that you can’t really get a feeling for the person. It seems to me newspaper stories now are either glowing reports of somebody or damnation of crooks and politicians – and there is a difference. I think that it takes a little bit of space to be able to tell a story that has more then this much depth, and those aren’t the kind that are in anymore.

**Peter Shea:** What’s a plausible space for telling a story with depth? What did you find comfortable?

**Peg Meier:** Well, in my day, it was 30 or 40 inches and that was a stretch. People writing stories these days don’t usually get that kind of space unless it’s the big opening story of the day. But that worked for me for all those years, and for other feature writers.

**Peter Shea:** And what does that come to an words?

**Peg Meier:** I’m sorry, we don’t do words; we do inches.

**Peter Shea:** Do you have an idea of what kind of good you were doing for your readers putting this material out?

**Peg Meier:** Well, I think all of us that were doing this kind of story could give examples of the kind of reaction we got, even in the days before the Internet. People actually sit down and write a letter in response to some of these things, and we never could predict. Before email, the story I got absolutely the most attention, the most response to, was about Sister Kenny. It was one of the anniversaries of her career, and I told the story of how this backwoods Australian nurse, not a nun—she was never a Catholic sister – how she worked on polio and how she came to Minneapolis and how she finally got some attention here when she was ignored in New York and Los Angeles and other places. Minneapolis became the center of the world for fighting polio, thanks to Sister Kenny. She was the grand marshal of the Aquatennial Parade, and she was one of the nation’s most admired women, and that story got so much reaction, because so many people in the Twin Cities met her, had been treated by her; their children had been treated by her. I got so much reaction to something that I thought was going to be a regular story. That was part of the fun of reporting; you didn’t know which ones would set fire to people’s hearts.

**Peter Shea:** Did you generally get some reaction?
**Peg Meier:** Generally some reaction. But what reporters face today is so much negative reaction because of the Internet, no matter what’s written. People can find something to pick at, and people can get pretty mean. My friends who are still at the newspaper say that they almost hesitate to see what the reader’s responses are online, because so many of them are just nasty. “Why did you use this word and not that word? How could you have written about that person? Why don’t you investigate this instead of that?” I think I was there in the golden years.

**Peter Shea:** I have not figured out how to get a feedback loop to happen with respect to my show in 20 years. I think that’s probably because I haven’t tried very hard, for just the reason you mention. Occasionally, I run into someone who has seen it and they tell me things, and I figure that sort of generalizes. I work in a sort of vacuum. My way of thinking is: what is good for people? They may not like it. They may not appreciate it. But what would I regard as a real gift if somebody gave it to me. I’ll do that, and then I’ll put it out, and if they don’t want it, there are 200 channels violence and pornography and violent pornography just a number away. So I haven’t thought a lot about response.

**Peg Meier:** But I think there are people out there who are looking for positive stories about people doing decent things. Not necessarily saving lives – not the big stuff – but just people living honest, good lives.

**Peter Shea:** Model-able people – people you can follow or imitate because they are enough like you that you can try to be that good. That’s very important for me.

**Peg Meier:** But not Polyanna stories, either. I never liked doing stories about something so gooey that it was unappealing. Again, the real factor: the people who are overcoming something or struggling somehow or having a success when success seemed hard to find. That’s the kind of story I like. I did a lot of stories about families who had illnesses. One the of the stories I did – and followed this family for over 20 years – was the story of Matthew Fink, who was a year and a half when he had a terrible infection. In the hospital, they had to amputate most of his arms and legs, believe it or not. He survived. He is brain was excellent. He is now done with college, and a photographer. I followed that family for a long time. Believe it or not, this was an uplifting, happy story just because of the strength of these people.

**Peter Shea:** Did you very often get to do that kind of long-term story?

**Peg Meier:** Every once in a while. The photographer Stormy Grader and I got to stick with people for a while. It was always fascinating to keep going back to the same story. Another one was about a pregnant teenager, a girl who was pregnant already at 14 or 15, and how she handled the pregnancy and then raising a child – just amazing, a few other medical stories, and then some history things, like the sister Kenny thing I kept getting back to. Lindbergh – I have always been fascinated by Charles Lindbergh, and so I got to do several stories over the years about him, and got to interview his wife, who I admired so much, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. So, lots of fun stuff!
There was also great reader reaction to some of the books. One Saturday morning, I got a telephone call from a woman who said, “Are you the Peg Meier who worked on *Bring Warm Clothes*?” and I said, “Yes.” She said, “I’m so excited I think I’m going to wet my pants!” And I said, “What’s going on here? What are you talking about?” She had flipped open the book, and there was her mother’s coffee party, a photo of her mother’s friends sitting around the dining room table in, I think it was, the 1930s, and she could go around the table and tell me who each one was, all of whom were deceased by the time she found the picture in the book. She was so excited. Another story: I got a letter from a woman who said she had given *Bring Warm Clothes* to her mother on Christmas Day; Christmas Day happened to be her mother’s birthday. She gave her the book, her mother flipped open the book, and there was the dad, her mother’s father. Unfortunately, it was on a wanted poster, and the wanted poster said “Wanted for Bastardy.” It seems that this man long ago had come from Sweden, gotten a girl pregnant here, headed back to Sweden, and then changed his mind, came back, married the woman, had a big family, and the woman whose birthday it was had never known the story of her father being on a wanted poster because he had gotten a girl pregnant. And teenagers today love that story.

Teenagers say, “You could be arrested, you could be on a wanted poster, because of pregnancy?” Yep, that’s the way it was. Part of the fun of the history is letting young people know about how things used to be.

**Peter Shea:** People talk a lot about the distance, the gap between young people and even the life I grew up with, in the 50s and 60s, to say nothing of my father’s life, when horses were the biggest item in anybody’s life. Does it worry you, how fast we lose cursive, how fast we lose horses, how fast we lose typewriters?

**Peg Meier:** My book club recently read *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis, written and set in the 1920s. They were talking about, when we were growing up – most of us graduated from high school in the 60s – the 20s wasn’t that long ago. It was a couple generations, but our parents knew the 20s. Now, the 1920s, it’s practically 100 years ago. What a difference between the 1920s and what we’ll be experiencing soon. The time gap gets more important as we age. One thing about old photos is: people love to look to see what is in the background of a picture. Often these days we focus on the person and don’t include the background that often tells so much. For instance, one of the pictures in *Bring Warm Clothes* shows an old fashioned telephone, and children love to see that. Some of the pictures from the 40s and 50s show the old fashioned curtains, in the back behind a person, or the wallpaper, or the kitchen sink, and I think some of these things get to be more important as we distance ourselves from a particular time. I’m trying to take more pictures now that show the surroundings.

I’d like to tell you something about my bookclub, if I could. When I was about to retire, some of my friends at the Tribune took me out for lunch, and there was a big group of us, 40 or 50, and one of my friends said, “What do you want to do in your retirement?” “Well, one thing is form a serious book club.” What’s a serious book club? A serious book club follows the rules that I was taught for a story I wrote for the *StarTrib*; an expert from the East Coast came to Minnesota and held a two-day conference on how to form a successful book group. I have incorporated some of the rules with this group. I said,
“Don't join unless you're serious about it. You have to have read the book. You have to have finished the book, before you show up.” This really eliminates a lot of people who think book clubs are for drinking wine and eating good food and gossiping. We are there to talk about the book. So we get together for an hour first, we have dinner and some wine and catch up with each other’s lives. We try to move to another room in the hostess’ house, just to symbolize, “Okay, now we’re going to take this seriously.” And we talk about the book. Most of the members in this club are former writers and editors at the newspaper. And we have a lot to talk about: we talk about that book and that author for at least a solid hour. And the things that people have to say are just amazing; I just love that hour once a month, because my friends are just astounding in what they pick out of these books. I love it! So it’s serious: “Don’t read it; don’t even show up!”

Peter Shea: I sense in your talk an urge to find intelligence – or encourage intelligence.

Peg Meier: Yeah, intelligence meaning “a little bit deeper than most everyday occurrences.” Something to think about, and by this age – I'm almost 68 – a lot of life experiences, a lot of wonderful people who have told me their stories. Life gets more amazing with each passing year.

Peter Shea: I wanted to ask you about something that has happened to me as an interviewer. Sometimes, I’m talking to someone about something they have not told, at least in that detail, to anyone, and so a kind of intimacy gets established here and then at the end, there is the question, “What does this mean?” It’s the sort of interchange that is, in any other context, the foundation of friendships, of ongoing relationships, of people being important to each other. How did that work for you?

Peg Meier: Well, often it’s a one-time experience, a one-time story. Often, the real, wonderful nugget happens at the end, happens when I would close the notebook, think we were done, and the person would want to add something. I learned to not close the notebook quite so quickly and to ask “What else do you want to tell me?” And that’s often when the really good stuff came along. It’s hard for interviewers, myself included, not to want to control the time and the direction. So often, the gaps are what get people talking. A photographer I worked with when I first got to the paper said to me, “The people we interview don’t usually get to tell their stories. They don’t want to hear your story, Peg; they want to tell their stories. You need to just be quiet and listen to them”. And I thought I was, by telling a little about me, easing the conversation. Actually, I was probably throwing a roadblock; if they wanted to know something about me, that’s different. But mostly, they’ve got something amazing to tell me, and they want their time to do it. That was a good lesson for me: shut up and listen! And now I am taking a class at my church – its not exactly a class, just a series of discussions – and people tell their stories, and there is no crosstalk, meaning people don’t react, and you might tell a story of great sorrow or great joy, and we’re taught to listen, let them finish and then later talk to them about the importance of that, but, in most conversations in life, we’re thinking about how we should answer, what we should say next: “What story should I tell to make this person feel better?” instead of just concentrating on listening. It’s a very hard skill for me.
**Peter Shea:** It takes a long time.

The perpetual fear of dead air. At least in writing, you don’t have that.

**Peg Meier:** It’s worse for you.

**Peter Shea:** So you have all these ghosts in your head, all these people you’ve talked to over the years. Do they talk to each other?

**Peg Meier:** No, they don’t talk to each other, but they talk to me every once in a while. One who just came up in my head a while ago was a man who was 105, decades ago, an African-American man in St. Paul, lovely summer day, sitting on his porch; he was telling me stories of how he’d always have a shot of Old Grand-Dad first thing in the morning, to get going. He was telling me about a son who lived here and a daughter who live there, and I said, “How many children do you have?” And he said, quite soberly, “I ain’t got no children.” And again he mentioned a child, and I thought, “I’m not hearing him or he’s not hearing me,” and so I asked again, “How many children do you have?” He said, “Ain’t got no children.” Finally the third time he couldn’t help it; he started grinning. He said, “Ain’t got no children. At 105, you ain’t got children. You got old people.” His children were in their 80s, and so he couldn’t think of them as children anymore. I just had to burst out laughing at that one. And he knew he had me; he was pulling my string to get that one out.

**Peter Shea:** The great storytellers have got just a string of them ready; it doesn’t take much for those moves to come out.

**Peg Meier:** And I am about to travel with one of Minnesota’s great storytellers: I am going on a tour of Greece with Kevin Kling, who knows so much about the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, and is leading a Minnesota Public Radio tour of Greece. And that is going to be more fun than anything I can imagine!

**Peter Shea:** Did you do any of that as a journalist, letting people guide you through or lead you through or walk you through places?

**Peg Meier:** I don’t understand.

**Peter Shea:** I mean, you get one kind of thing if you have somebody sitting in a chair, another kind of thing if you have them show you their farm or show you their town or take you on a road trip. Did you ever fool with that kind of approach?

**Peg Meier:** That was a lot of fun. One that pops to mind is the story of an ancient fort near Little Falls, Minnesota, where explorer Zebulun Pike had spent a terrible winter. And we were able to go to that spot, and the artist I was with sat down and said, “Do you think the fort kind of looked like this?” – and he started drawing and the archaeologist said “Yeah, yeah, that is exactly how this thing looked, we think.” So, going to a place
was often special. Cemeteries: people love to take reporters or other journalists to cemeteries and tell stories there – rivers, and a couple of lakes with people. I always love going into people’s homes; I think the house tells a lot about someone. And people are more comfortable in their own home then meeting in a coffee shop or something like that. It was universally fascinating to me to be able to get into people’s houses and ask questions.

Peter Shea: You worked with a photographer.

Peg Meier: Usually. I loved working with the photographer Stormi Greener, and often we worked on stories together. Sometimes I’d do the interview and the photographer would be sent later. Sometimes it would be a different photographer. It is nice to be with the photographer at the same moment is that we are experiencing the same thing at the same moment and can work together to produce the story. One thing that bothers me about newspapers these days: rarely are the reporter and the photographer there at the same time, it seems to me. The reporter will start the story with one set of images that don’t go too well with the picture I see on the page. But that’s change in newspapering; they’re less likely to send a team out together.

Peter Shea: In my experience with the Strib, in the good case, the reporter and the photographer are a pretty tight team, over a couple of days, if they’re there for a couple of days. They talk to each other; they are two pair of eyes on the same stuff. You mentioned some of the stories you covered: it must've been a different thing, to focus in on an event, like a murder, and interview around it, as opposed to focusing on a person. Were there special skills or attitudes or strategies you needed for that sort of work?

Peg Meier: The usual: keep the eyes and ears open. I made it a practice not to figure out what the story would definitely be until I got there, and it was fun just to go to an event and see what transpired and look for the magic moment to start telling the story with this instance of reality, and then start building the story around that: the aha moment – this tidbit will help me tell the rest of the story. That was a magic moment. So many of them were fun, I remember covering a press conference: it was Don Fraser’s first open house at his office. Not very many people came, and I was able to start the story with, “The people who came to Fraser’s first open house both seemed to enjoy the afternoon.” Two people had shown up. Things like that were fun. I often thought that, if a bit of humor or a bit of humanity could be injected into a story, all the better. Newspapers are full of so much hard stuff that, if a little grin can be included somewhere along the way, I like to do that.

Peter Shea: We’ve talked about so many ways that newspapers are moving away from the things you care about. Is there any good news? Are you seeing things in journalism that make you happy?

Peg Meier: Yes, good question! Much of journalism is fascinating to watch. I think the political reporting has gotten sharper, maybe more honest. So many of the pieces in the Strib and in the New York Times are fascinating pieces of writing about something that is occurring in today’s world. I am often flabbergasted by some of the hard news reporting.
Some of the features, the human interest story – that’s not as prevalent as it once was. I love newspapers. I love them on paper. I really don’t care to read the morning paper online. I like holding it. I like sitting right here; usually first thing in the morning, I’m right here in this chair with my little dog on my lap snoozing after his breakfast, the fireplace often is going right here, and it’s one of my favorite, quiet, lovely times of day. I love paper newspapers.

**Peter Shea:** There is some worry that that can’t survive.

**Peg Meier:** Can’t survive. Maybe when my generation is gone – people who have grown up holding newspapers – that may have to be the end of it. Certainly advertising revenue is down in print. And young people love to read online; I just have a hard time adapting to it. I spend enough time online for things that I need to do there, or I’m looking for specific information, and I’ll find it online, not in paper sitting next to me or a book sitting next to me, but when it comes to fun, interesting reading, I like sitting here with paper in my hand.

**Peter Shea:** We are of an age, and one thing I’m conscious of: I can make twenty-year plans; I can’t make fifty-year plans anymore. I’m curious, what sort of projects you’d be attracted to, if you could think in terms of a thirty-year career or a fifty-year career?

**Peg Meier:** I can’t think that way. I can’t think that way at all now. Five years seems like a long time. One thing that I’ve enjoyed so much the last three years, that I hope to continue, is a volunteering at my neighborhood school. These are six or seven year olds, in first grade, who love to read to someone else or love to be read to. The teacher has more than enough activities he needs to be doing to be getting these kids into a reading mode. So he – a young male teacher – will let me have one or two kids or three, and we’ll go out in the hallway and read books. It’s fantastic! One of the marks of a perfect volunteer job is when one knows that one is getting more out of it than one is giving. It’s about an hour a day that I spend at the school and, I’ll tell you, it’s more fun! But the problems children have these days are overwhelming: wonderful little people coming to school hungry, or in clothes that aren't so great, kids that haven’t had enough sleep – first-graders that are rolling up on the carpet and taking a nap, because they haven’t had proper rest. I don’t know how the teachers handle things so well, but I am furious whenever I hear someone criticizing teachers these days. Teachers get handed so much and have to accomplish amazing amounts of material in one school year, and then to do it over and over and over just astounds me. But the miracle of learning to read is incredible to me – you know, these little kids, beginning of first grade: some of them can read pretty well, some of them can’t, in this particular school, and by the end of the year, most of them can read pretty well. To see the light bulb go off in the minds of these children when “Hey, I ‘m reading.” “Boy, you are so much better at this than you used to be!” “Tell me this story!” “What about Frog and Toad? What are Frog and Toad doing today?” The gingerbread man: “Run, run as fast as you can; you can’t catch me, I’m the gingerbread man.” I’ve heard that 5000 times, and it’s still always so much fun. I just love being in the school, and helping a little bit. It was fun, when I first went in to volunteer, the teacher asked what I wanted to be called and I said, “What do they call
“They call me Mr. May.” “Well, then, I guess: Miss Meier,” and he said “Fine,” and then he turned to the children and he said, “Children, this is Miss Meier. She is going to come every day to help us learn to read.” And I said to myself, “Every day! I was thinking of every other Tuesday.” And he got me hooked. I love being with these kids who are so entertaining and smart and sweet, and many of them have progressed so much that it’s great fun.

Peter Shea: You are fond of Frog and Toad – my staple. So, you’ve got your retirement put together: your book group, your own books, your historical research, and this slightly-larger-than-you-had-planned project in the elementary school. Is there other stuff you’re doing? This is a rich vein.

Peg Meier: I try to get to my health club. I try to move around a little every day. I'm no athlete, but this place has got me moving. I try to do that for an hour or so every day. So I’ve scratched together a nice little life in retirement, and I’m enjoying it a great deal. If it weren’t for the Minnesota winters, I’d be a pretty happy person.

Peter Shea: Are you tempted to flee?

Peg Meier: No, I can’t flee. My roots are so deep here; I couldn’t possibly flee. I’d like to flee for maybe a month; that seems improbable: a week or maybe two in winter, but that’s really not enough, is it?

Peter Shea: All sorts of people face just that pull: can I stand to leave, can I stand to stay?

Peg Meier: There's a story about some Dakota people who had stories that were saved for blizzard weather, stories that were told in incredibly bad weather, sort of like saving videos to keep the kids happy when the weather is nasty and nobody is heading out. I wish I knew what those stories were. I don’t know what they were. I just know they saved stories to tell in bad Minnesota winters.

Peter Shea: I’ll bet that’s a rich vein. One’s first interview, you get the every day stories, the house dress of the stories, and the special, Sunday go to Meeting stories, but then there are the stories that people don’t bring out except on special occasions.

Peg Meier: Family reunions, perhaps, or meetings of old friends?

Peter Shea: I’ve been torn about documenting memorial services because, on the one hand, it seems like the most important information that ever comes out, and it’s so private.

Peg Meier: Yeah.

Peter Shea: It seems like a very important public record, and, the same time, something you don’t want to put a camera on.
Peg Meier: Interesting.

Peter Shea: What happens as people get quite old, in their way of thinking and their way of talking and how their relationship with the interviewer works? I haven’t had a whole lot of opportunity to interview extremely elderly people; my record is 103.

Peg Meier: I beat you by two years.

Peter Shea: But I did get an interview Eugene McCarthy a few years before he died. That was a treat! I was interviewing an old man, and it was important that I was interviewing an old man. What have you noticed?

Peg Meier: I have noticed that, with increasing age, there are fewer shrouds over the story. People just want to tell, and don’t care so much about the consequences, don’t care so much what people will think about it. And it makes it a lot easier, in some respects. The older the people are – the people that I interview – the more they know themselves, the more they know what they’re interested in, what captivates them, what has moved them. I don’t like interviewing teenagers. I much prefer the other end of the age spectrum. Little kids – I like interviewing little kids. But 20-year-olds, I think, are tougher.

Peter Shea: That leads into a kind of corny question, but it’s a natural. Have you got favorites, favorite interviews, favorite encounters?

Peg Meier: Yeah, but they change every day. I’m kind of surprised when I’m talking to you, Peter, at the examples I pulled up. I don’t know that they were stunning examples. It’s hard for me to come up with favorites unless I’m directed to a particular story or a particular event.

Peter Shea: Do you ever do an interview and realize, “There’s a world I didn’t know about?”

Peg Meier: There’s a woman who does botanical painting, very carefully documenting a leaf or a bloom of a flower, and she was giving classes to people who were doing this. A bra fitter – I once interviewed a bra fitter at Dayton’s. There’s a whole world of people out there who are helping women find the proper bra. Who would have thought, right? Architects working on specific little pieces. Historians studying some little aspect of Minnesota history that I wouldn’t have thought anybody would have cared about. Librarians who know so much about specific areas of human knowledge. Teachers: I love talking to teachers who can tell me stories about the kids. I should have made a list of some of my favorite stories. I halfway expected that. I once did a weird little story about the Lois Club. There’s a group that met and I think still meets, once a month: the only criterion for membership is that the person’s first name is Lois; they have nothing in common, age, profession, etc., except that their first name is Lois. Isn’t that weird and wonderful. I once did a story about a group who used to get together once a month to eat
liver, because in those days liver was considered very healthy, especially for pregnant women. Their husbands didn’t care for liver and onions, and so they’d get together at somebody’s house and eat liver and onions once a month. As they aged, and many of them lost their husbands, they started going to restaurants. They just went out for liver and onions once a month. And one of them told me, with great satisfaction, that her doctor had told her not to eat liver. It was no longer advised. It wasn’t good for you. She should stop this. She should never eat liver and onions again. And then she said, “I ate liver and onions every month, and that doctor’s dead. He should have eaten liver and onions.” So, who knows what I would get into. It was just a wonderful opportunity to talk with people.

Peter Shea: Thank you.