

Part I

## **An Interview . . .**

### **IDA P. ROLF**

Interviewed by Rosemary Feitis

**FEITIS:** You say you were in touch with osteopath early in your life?

**ROLF:** I knew about Dr. Still before I ever got into rolfing. Probably never would've gotten into rolfing if I hadn't known about osteopathy. I had had very good experiences with an osteopath in my 20's, Dr. Morrison. He was a blind man, out of Port Jefferson, and we became close personal friends. I used to go with him to all kinds of osteopathic and chiropractic seminars. I was interested, and I had the opportunity through escorting him, although he really didn't need to be "escorted." His idea of spending his day off and really having a good time was to take the 7:00 train out of Port Jefferson by himself, going to New York, go around to various pawn shops, and look up tools and so forth. He'd come back with some thing or other having spent the day going from one pawn shop to another. And one time I said to him, "Tom, where'd you get this?" "Oh, that — I got that from my uncle." I said, "your uncle — you don't have an uncle." "Oh, I got it from my uncle. Don't you know who my uncle is?" On the strength of which I won that little pewter pitcher over there.

**FEITIS:** I'd like to go back in time. You were in your 20's. . .

**ROLF:** I was a member of the Rockefeller Institute.

**FEITIS:** . . . You were sick and you went to see an osteopath. About when in this period of time were you interested in yoga, or were you?

**ROLF:** Much, much later — after I had a couple of kids.

**FEITIS:** So you got married. . .

**ROLF:** Oh, I got married before the osteopath trip.

**FEITIS:** And then you had 2 children much later?

**ROLF:** m-hum.

**FEITIS:** And so you spent your young years working at the Rockefeller Institute, and then what? You left at some point to go to California?

**ROLF:** No, I didn't at all. I left at some point to stay in New York. I left at the time that my father died, because my father's affairs were in such shape that somebody had to straighten them out, and I was elected, as I was sole heir. My father died in '28, and the depression set in about '32. I was married about 1920. I was married for about 10 years before I had children.

**FEITIS:** And the osteopath came about in the middle of all that?

**ROLF:** No, the osteopath came about in the beginning of all that. My mother took me to that osteopath; she used to go to him. I had been struck by a horse's hoof when I first went to Colorado, and as a result of that I had what looked like a

pneumonia except you don't get pneumonia out there. This accident occurred just the day before I was leaving for Yellowstone. It was a horrible trip. I had a temperature of about 104° and was living alone in a cabin that was only heated by a stove, and no hot water. Eventually I landed in a hospital in Montana. The doctor wasn't satisfied with my progress so he said, I'm going to send an osteopath in. So a young man came, and after his ministrations I could breathe again. When I got well enough to "walk home," so to speak (there was a railroad strike at the time in those parts), I could hardly get across the country. Eventually, I did get across the country and my mother took me with her to this blind osteopath, Dr. Morrison, in Port Jefferson. He was highly regarded by his confreres. Shortly before Dr. Morrison's death, the osteopaths were going to build an osteopathic hospital or center on Long Island and were going to call it the Morrison Center.

**FEITIS:** Was that unusual to go to an osteopath in those days?

**ROLF:** Yes, they were not accepted. There was still a great deal of fighting going on between the medics and the osteopaths. They were not accepted at all.

**FEITIS:** How did you and he happen to become friends?

**ROLF:** How does one become friends? I used to do a great deal of reading to him. . .

**FEITIS:** Did you get interested in osteopathy per se at that point?

**ROLF:** Well, he wanted me to. I was interested in the theory of osteopathy — that structure determines function.

**FEITIS:** But you were more interested in your chemistry at that point?

**ROLF:** No, I was no longer interested in chemistry at that point. I had left the Institute in 1928, something like that. I had started there as a technician and I got up to be a second or third grade member of the staff. I was there for twelve or thirteen years. As I say, when I finally left it, my father was obviously dying, and so forth.

**FEITIS:** Family matters were pretty much what preoccupied you at that point? And there were two kids. . . did you take the children to Morrison?

**ROLF:** Both the children were his "babies," so to speak. I don't mean he delivered them: he cared for me during my pregnancies.

\* \* \* \* \*

**FEITIS:** You met Sutherland?

**ROLF:** Yes, I met Dr. Sutherland, and I took one of my sons to him. He had a very narrow head, which the Sutherland method was peculiarly well-adapted to treating.

**FEITIS:** And how did that end?

**ROLF:** We ended up going our respective ways. I lived out on Long Island and Dr. Sutherland was in New York only for a couple of days to see people. He had a place down in Florida. I don't know where else he lived, but toward the end of his life he was living in Florida.

**FEITIS:** And the only time you really had anything to do with him in another way was in a two day seminar. When was that?

**ROLF:** I'd say it was the early 1940's. Probably during the early years of the war. The early years — not the late years.

**FEITIS:** And at that point you were already beginning your work?

**ROLF:** I always did work of my own, from the 'twenties on.

**FEITIS:** Manipulative work?

**ROLF:** Within limits, yes.

**FEITIS:** How did that come about?

**ROLF:** I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. You don't know these things that lead from one thing to another in your life. . .

**FEITIS:** I know, but it's an unusualness that people start to do that kind of work.

**ROLF:** Everything in my life has been relatively unusual.

**FEITIS:** Somebody came up and said, do me, and you said, Well, I think I can push it a little here?

**ROLF:** Well, it was during the war years, the early war years, when a woman came to me in Manhasset. . . A friend of ours from Stony Brook married and one day brought his wife in to call in Manhasset. This was after we built our house in Manhasset, so it was about 1940. And I was talking about the fact that I had been visiting schools. I used to come into New York once a week and visit some of these far out schools, trying to make up my mind what kind of school I wanted to send my kids to — I guess this school I'm talking about was the Ethical Culture school. At any rate, it was somewhere where they did unusual work with music. I was talking to this lady about having seen this work and that I admired it, and so forth. It was just afternoon tea conversation. And she said, that sounds like the work my sister Ethel does. And I said, I would like to meet your sister Ethel. She said, well, there's no use in your meeting my sister Ethel because my sister Ethel has been through an accident and she can't teach music any more. She can't play the piano, she can't use her hands. She can't even comb her own hair. And I said, well, I'd like to meet your sister Ethel anyhow. So the day came when Ethel came up the front walk. She had fallen on the streets of New York where there was a hole on the pavement, and she had very badly injured one hand and arm, and the other wasn't that good. She couldn't do such a thing as comb her own hair or get her own meals, so she was living with her mother. And I looked at her, and said, I bet I could fix that. I said, do you trust me to try it? You can't be any worse off. (She had just sued the city of New York and lost the suit. And she had paid all kinds of money in doctors' bills and so forth — \$20,000 anyway. So she was feeling pretty low in her mind.) I said, I'll make a bargain with you. If I can get you to the place where you can teach music, will you teach my children? She said "yes." And so I started in. I started, really, with yoga exercises, which I was using at that point. And it wasn't longer than 4 work hours later, when she was in good enough shape that she could start teaching music. So I started a little class for four kids, in Manhasset in my house. And that's where it started. Now of course, Ethel had a friend who hadn't been able to get help, and this friend had a friend, and from then on my doorstep was pretty much filled with people who hadn't gotten help elsewhere. This was the beginning of the war, by the way, and Ethel was accepted as a WAC within a year or two, so that was a successful operation.

**FEITIS:** When you say yoga exercises — she worked doing exercises with her hands? or her body?

**ROLF:** With her body, her whole body. It wasn't her hands that were in trouble, it was her shoulders that were in trouble. It's a long time since I've thought of Ethel Anderson.

\* \* \* \* \*

**ROLF:** I first went to yoga with a Miss Caroline Brown. We went to talk with this yoga master, and I sat in his study talking to him. It was a half dark, winter afternoon, and Miss Brown went to sleep.

**FEITIS:** And left you in the lurch with the yoga master. . .

**ROLF:** Oh, I wasn't in the lurch, I was doing just fine. But Miss Brown queered her opportunities, as you can see. So at any rate, that was when I started studying yoga, somewhere around late 30's or very early 40's.

**FEITIS:** Who was this yoga man? Was he an Easterner?

**ROLF:** He was an American. His family, his father had been a tantric and had brought him up in a tantric family. He had spent most of his childhood adolescence in India. In a tantric family children at seven years of age are taken away from their family and put into another family of the same cultural grade, to be brought up with the other family; then a child from the other family is swapped back to their family. That's part of the educational system, so that they're taught an educational system without the kind of emotional attachments that are inevitable between father and son, etc. They had to learn the Vedas by heart, by rote, so that they knew every darn word of it.

**FEITIS:** That's sort of the equivalent of doing 500 cartwheels in a row?

**ROLF:** Exactly. And actually this worked. . . I'm sure you've heard me tell this story: There was a teacher whose name was Max Mueller. He was an old German but was working at Oxford. He got very interested in the manuscripts from India that were being brought West at that time because of the British Raj. He would get these old manuscripts, and a word might be erased or a whole line would be erased or worn through. He had four Hindu high caste Brahmins from India, who were being trained in Oxford. Now, when an erasure happened, he would send for one after another of them, and say "how does line so and so in verse or chapter so and so, go?" And the young man would spout it. Mueller would write that down, and then he'd send for the next student, and he'd repeat the same thing. So Mueller knew it was right. That was education in those days. So perhaps you can even understand why I feel the way I feel when I listen to some of these fools spouting about how they want to go and do yoga training and all that sort of stuff. They haven't got the where-with-all, and this they can't face.

**FEITIS:** What part of the world did this yoga teacher live in?

**ROLF:** He's dead now. He lived in New York State.

\* \* \* \* \*

**FEITIS:** When you were there with a doorstep full of people, what did you say you were doing?

**ROLF:** God knows. Fixing them up.

**FEITIS:** Primarily with yoga.

**ROLF:** Yes.

**FEITIS:** So you started pretty much teaching movement?

**ROLF:** I started rolfing when I started on Grace, during the war. Earlier, in about 1937, I met a woman named Brown, who used to teach exercises; some of those you've seen me do. I went to her for a while and learned those exercises. One day I was walking down Lexington Avenue, and somebody hailed me as I was crossing the street, somebody that I had met through Miss Brown. So I stopped to

chin with them in the middle of the street, of course, and I said, How is Miss Brown? And they said, "Oh, her teacher's in town." So I looked up Miss Brown again, and I said, What's this that I hear your teacher's in town? I'd like to meet her. The teacher proved to be a great big husky 60 odd year old osteopath, whose name was Amy Cochran. And she was the one who taught those exercises with which you are more or less familiar. She claimed that she had them by psychic perception from Dr. Rush — the medic that signed the Declaration of Independence. Dr. Cochran lived in southern California, in San Marino. She had come East for a time to work with an opera singer. I started observing her teaching, and trying to figure out what she was doing.

**FEITIS:** So actually you spent quite a bit of time with the yoga man and watching Amy Cochran.

**ROLF:** I spent years of my life studying all this, finding out what was wrong with it and why it didn't work. At the time that Amy was first in New York, Grace used to go to Amy. Grace was a completely crippled woman; she was about forty-five, I'd say. As a child of eight or so, she had been a great tomboy. And she had been diving off the roof of a pavillion, a boy was diving with her. They were diving together and things were getting "higher and higher," when she went off this roof, not having told the boy that she was going. He got mad and went after her. He went faster than she, and half way down he knocked her against the wall of the pool. She came out of it completely crippled, with her back just bent over. Grace couldn't do such a thing as reach down and pick up her stockings off the floor, she always had to have somebody with her. And she couldn't do such a thing as reach out and pull down a shade. So when I got home from Amy's in California, I called up Grace and I said, Grace, we're getting to work and we're going to fix you up. The day I started working with Grace was the day I really got rolfing going. I would look at her and say, this is in the wrong place. And I'd say, now Grace, does this feel better this way or does this feel better this way? And she'd say, that way, so we'd organize that corner. So this went on for a couple of years, and at the end of a couple of years, Grace picked herself up and she went out to California all by herself. And that was when the principle of rolfing was really born.

**FEITIS:** You move it to the place where it's better.

**ROLF:** I moved it toward the place where it belonged. Grace had been working with Amy Cochran, but Cochran never fixed her up because Cochran's system wasn't right for that. Cochran didn't understand that bodies had to lengthen; basically, that's what was wrong with Amy Cochran's work.

**FEITIS:** So you came back and you went to an Alexander person in Massachusetts?

**ROLF:** Mrs. Lee — I used to go up there every weekend or every two weeks or something like that, and work with her for one day. But I didn't work that long with her — two, three months. . .

**FEITIS:** And in the meantime, people were still hanging around your doorstep?

**ROLF:** I was always able to do something for them, they always trusted me. Because I never told them something I didn't know I could produce. And it's still the same way. If you never tell them something you have to back down on later, why, then they believe you. That's the way it goes.