

DALLAS D. BIXLER  
1932 OLYMPIC GAMES  
GYMNASTICS



AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY  
INTRODUCTION

Southern California has a long tradition of excellence in sports and leadership in the Olympic Movement. The Amateur Athletic Foundation is itself the legacy of the 1984 Olympic Games. The Foundation is dedicated to expanding the understanding of sport in our communities. As a part of our effort, we have joined with the Southern California Olympians, an organization of over 1,000 women and men who have participated on Olympic teams, to develop an oral history of these distinguished athletes.

Many Olympians who competed in the Games prior to World War II agreed to share their Olympic experiences in their own words. In the pages that follow, you will learn about these athletes, and their experiences in the Games and in life as a result of being a part of the Olympic Family.

The Amateur Athletic Foundation, its Board of Directors, and staff welcome you to use this document to enhance your understanding of sport in our community.

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AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY  
METHODOLOGY

Interview subjects include Southern California Olympians who competed prior to World War II. Interviews were conducted between March 1987, and August 1988, and consisted of one to five sessions each. The interviewer conducted the sessions in a conversational style and recorded them on audio cassette, addressing the following major areas:

Family History

Date/place of birth; occupation of father/mother; siblings; family residence;

Education

Primary and secondary schools attended; college and post-collegiate education;

Sport-Specific Biographical Data

Subject's introduction to sport—age, event and setting of first formal competition; coaches/trainers/others who influenced athletic development; chronology of sports achievements; Olympic competition; post-Olympic involvement in sports;

General Biographical Data

Employment history; marital history; children; communities of residence; retirement;

General Observations

Reactions and reflections on Olympic experience; modernization of sport; attitudes on and involvement with the Olympic Movement; advice to youth and aspiring athletes.

Interview transcripts were edited and may include additional material based on subsequent conversations and/or subject's own editing.

DALLAS D. BIXLER

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES  
GYMNASTICS - HORIZONTAL BAR  
Gold Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

February, 1988  
Buena Park, California  
by George A. Hodak

DALLAS D. BIXLER

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: I'm in Buena Park interviewing Olympian Dallas Bixter. Mr. Bixler was the gold medalist in the horizontal bar in the 1932 Summer Games in Los Angeles. Mr. Bixler, before we get into the Olympics, I want you to talk a bit about your family background. When and where were you born?

Bixler: I was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, February 17, 1910. We lived there for my first ten years. I remember my aunt used to take me to the main park in Hutchinson. I loved to race around the roller-coaster and jump around on the slides and all. Then one day a big cyclone came through town and tore up the park. I remember we had to hide under the beds during that.

Anyway, my father, John A. Bixler, was in the produce business and had five grocery stores in Hutchinson. And he was also quite a hunter. He hunted all through Mexico and the Southwest.

Hodak: And he had worked with the Wright brothers?

Bixler: Yes, my father was one of the first aviators in the state of Kansas. He was a protege of the Wright brothers. He was issued his pilot's license on behalf of the International Aero Club by Orville and Wilbur Wright in 1913. In fact, he helped the Wright brothers build some of their early planes in Dayton, Ohio. My father flew the first flying boat built in the United States. But the plane crashed into the Mississippi River, and they sent my father home to Kansas in a boxcar. He was seriously injured and lost an ear, but he recovered and went on to live to the age of 82. In 1920 he sold all five grocery stores he owned and we came out to California. He later

moved back to Kansas.

Hodak: How did you get the name Dallas Denver Bixler?

Bixler: Well, as I said, my dad was in the produce business in Kansas and he traveled around buying groceries and produce for the grocery stores. So they took me up to Denver, Colorado, when I was just six-and-a-half weeks old and he said, "Well, this is your name." Dallas—because he was down in Texas buying things; and Denver—because he went up to Colorado and bought fruits and so forth. So I'm now known as Dallas Denver. (laughter)

Hodak: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Bixler: I had four brothers and two sisters. My mother had one baby on Christmas day which passed away. We still have three brothers and two sisters and it's a pretty open family.

Hodak: When your father brought your family out to California, what sort of work did he get into?

Bixler: He went back into the grocery business. He knew two men out here that had come from that area where he had lived and that was really a good thing because he could get a job easy enough. He worked in L.A. in the grocery business. They went back to Kansas in 1933 to start another store. They had sold all the stores when he came out here in 1920 and business just wasn't as good as he thought it would be.

Hodak: Where did you receive your schooling? In which part of Los Angeles were you living?

Bixler: We lived on what now is the Harbor Freeway. We sold the house there and built a house just two or three blocks from Los Angeles High School. That is now Olympic Boulevard but it used to be Country Club Drive. I graduated from L.A. High School, which was

originally built down farther in the city. In fact, it was down on Sixth and Broadway. There's a big building there that used to be L.A. High School, then they made it into a business. But that was what we knew as L.A. High School. I attended on Country Club Drive—which is how Olympic Boulevard—at the second site. Of course, the earthquake of 1933 didn't do it very much good. But they rebuilt it again.

Hodak: Nor did the quake in 1970. Tell me, during your high school days were you at all involved in gymnastics or other sports?

Bixler: Well, I first became interested in gymnastics while in grammar school. But in high school, I wanted to play football and my dad said, "No, you'll break your neck." So I said that I wanted to be a gymnast because we had one of the best coaches for gymnastics at L.A. High School, Albert Hemseth. I entered the first meet in 1925 at L.A. High School. That was against Hollywood High School. Later, when I started to work for the bank of America, I went to L.A. High School but the Bank was at Hollywood [Boulevard] and Highland Avenue, so I had to switch schools. But L.A. High didn't want me to go to another school, so the coach arranged it so that I could be an L.A. High School gymnast.

Hodak: After Los Angeles High School did you join an athletic club or a gymnastics club?

Bixler: Eventually I joined up with the Germania Turnverein, which was on Washington Boulevard near Hoover Street, and stayed with them until 1927. Then I decided that I would like to go to the L.A. Athletic Club. Herman Class, who had been in the 1904 Olympics, was one of the coaches there and he taught me the power of concentration on the apparatuses. Anyway, they had already picked the full gymnastics team. They brought me in and let me go ahead and take part in the 1930 state gymnastics championships in San Francisco. So we went up to San Francisco and I got third place in the all-around competition. So I thought that was an awfully good

start. I would have gone to the nationals in New York, but I didn't have enough money for the travel.

Hodak: And how did you build up your physique?

Bixler: Well, most of that was due to the rings. I also did a little bit of weightlifting at the LAAC.

Hodak: Okay, let's talk about the 1932 Olympic tryouts a bit. You mentioned the tryouts in Los Angeles took place five days prior to the opening of the Olympic Games. There were also tryouts on the East Coast.

Bixler: They were on the East Coast before that time because Alfred Jochim, one of our best gymnasts, did take a place in New York and came on out here. In the West Coast tryouts, I took first place. I was competing only in the horizontal bar; I was what they called a specialist. That was the only time gymnasts were allowed to compete in individual events in the Olympics—in 1932. And at the Games I was able to win first place and take it away from the two Finnish boys [Heikki Savolainen and Einar Terasvirta]. That was my success.

Hodak: Tell me about your competition.

Bixler: The events were held early in the morning and there was a rather small crowd for them. It started about eight o'clock in the morning and it lasted until about two or three in the afternoon. Our apparatus was set up out on the field. I was holding third place behind two Finns after the first routine. These boys from Finland used two new moves that were very tough. One was the dismount where they vaulted over the bar sideways. The other was a big arm swing, which was not used much up to then. So I went ahead and came out with this new move that Glenn Berry had taught me how to do in 1928, the reverse giant. It was a beautiful day—to go from third place up to first place.



Hodak: Tell me about this move that Glenn Berry had taught you.

Bixler: Well, he taught me the one move where I would cross my hands on coming across the bar, put my body in an L position going sideways and drop down on the mat.

Hodak: So this was a spectacular type of dismount?

Bixler: Yes. And a man said to me, "I didn't get to see that. Would you show it to me again?" And I said, "Well, I'm not sure I can do it just that way again." I can show you the picture that came out when I tried that again. My foot dropped over the bar instead of holding in an L position. But that didn't count because I had already been judged by the judges. They made you count your time that you came down off the bar in any position. You had to come down and hold your position on the mat for two seconds. Two seconds was enough time for you to stand up and show your judges that you were finished. That helped me a heck of a lot. One of the judges said, "You acknowledged every judge after you came off of that bar."

Hodak: How long was your routine?

Bixler: Approximately 72 seconds. And the judges would measure it out. They had to go to each one of the judges to see if anyone had made a mistake in misjudging the position that I had jumped off of. The rulebook says that the judges must acknowledge each judge as to the point that they have given that competitor. That's what happened in the Montreal Games; the judges were not talking to one another, they were not conferring. They conferred with one person only and they are supposed to confer with each of the judges that are on the board.

Hodak: I see. Let's get back to your winning of the gold medal in 1932.

After your dismount, did you have a pretty good feeling about your score? Did you have a sense that you had performed as best as you could?

Bixler: Yes, due to the fact that this was a personal position that you had put yourself into, doing something that wasn't done at any Olympic Games before. I can go back and compare this to the Games in Montreal when the girl was marked down tremendously because she had redone some of the moves that she had already done in another exercise.

Hodak: So you are penalized for that?

Bixler: Oh, yes. She was penalized tremendously. She did a move that she repeated three times in the free exercise, and you cannot do that in gymnastic competition. You cannot repeat any one move that you've done.

Hodak: Now, you were given your award two or three days following your performance?

Bixler: Yes. It was because the next event coming up after gymnastics was track and field. It took them three days to get that thing straightened out. They wanted to get the track and field going to bring more people into the Coliseum. That's why you see Governor Rolph giving out the medals on the third day, well after we had completed our events. So I was awarded the gold medal two days after my performance. Seeing the American flag go up between the two Finnish flags—that was really something. It brought tears to my eyes and still does.

Hodak: Let's talk a bit further about the Olympics. Tell me about the Olympic Village in Baldwin Hills.

Bixler: Well, it was the first time it had ever been done. It was the first time that we ever had a Village. They made the Village in a

marvelous fashion with a big theatre down in a round hole, so to speak, for the movie people and everybody else to come up and give us a good show. People would come by the thousands to see what was going on at the Village. We had to be in bed by ten o'clock. You couldn't be out of the Village or anything like that. So they had very good rules and we had marvelous lunches and dinners from different countries. We could go and eat with all the different countries, and they could come and have a meal with us.

Hodak: Were there any arrangements made for gymnasts to train?

Bixler: Oh, yes. I have a book with the pictures of all the different gymnasts and the rules and regulations. I remember when the Japanese came over to train, their hands were much smaller than the Americans and they had to bring their own hand grips. We used white powder on our hands but they used a kind of mud from their country.

Hodak: Gymnastics is very popular today in the Olympics. How would you compare gymnastics in 1932? Was it a minor sport?

Bixler: Yes, at that time. Attendance on that day was very, very poor. Only about 1500 people came to see the gymnastics on that day. In the competition, Italy was the strongest; Germany and especially the Japanese were not what they were in later years.

Hodak: There was a famous picture taken of you immediately after winning your event?

Bixler: A picture was taken of me going over the bar. They gave me that picture the day after it was done.

Hodak: What about this picture on the wall that I am looking at?

Bixler: Well, that was done by a Warner Brothers Studio gentleman who was a neighbor of ours at my folks' home in L.A. He put the thing into

the studio. He won a medal for these two pictures. I was given the picture and the day after that he got his medals from the studios. So that was a little different situation. I didn't know I was ever going to get a picture like that. I had two of them and now I've lost one.

Hodak: And what did you do with the rest of your time following your competition? Outside of the awards ceremony, were you able to attend other events?

Bixler: Yes, we got free tickets. The tickets were only about 50 cents. I have a book that shows you the cost of the different tickets and so forth.

Hodak: Aside from winning the gold medal, what other things do you recall of the Olympics?

Bixler: Well, the bank was very nice to me inasmuch as they gave me this plaque with a gold shield. So this was one of the deals that made me feel pretty good. They gave me a big dance that night after getting the medal. And they asked me not go to USC because they wanted to put me through the banking school. So for seven years I took the banking school; how to run a bank and all those kinds of things. Right away, I was moving right up. In 1933 we didn't have hardly any money in the banks in Los Angeles and they asked me to go into this company that was making the bank checks. I had gone through the school, so they transferred me to other branches, like out to Hollywood and Highland.

Hodak: Before we talk further about your career, you mentioned you had thoughts of making the all-around team in the 1936 Berlin Games. Following the 1932 Games, did you continue to compete with the L.A. Athletic Club?

Bixler: Oh, yes.

Hodak: Can you describe some of the bigger meets that you were a part of?

Bixler: I went to the World's Fair in Chicago in 1933 and took second place. Jack Holtz, who didn't make the 1932 team, took first. In 1934 I went back to the nationals in Baltimore. Roy Moore, the man in charge of all the gymnastics in the East, ran that deal. He told me I didn't do my routines the right way. The other coach said my routine was just fine, but I was down in tenth place for the all-around. Afterwards, I came back through Hutchinson. My dad had returned to Kansas by this time. I remember he introduced me to Ruth Law, a noted aviatrix. And the Santa Fe Hotel had a luncheon for me. Then they took me to Wichita and I was written up in the paper there.

Hodak: Were you pretty confident about making the Olympic team in 1936?

Bixler: I was until I injured my shoulder. I was hurt in May of 1935. I was doing an iron cross and my shoulders locked up. It ripped my deltoid out and threw it right up into my neck. The damage was not too severe at first. Then in August of 1935 I was asked to be in Pete Smith's *Sport Shorts*. They filmed us doing different gymnastic maneuvers at the MGM studio. I decided I could do it as long as they had somebody there to catch me in case my shoulder gave out and I came off the apparatus. I was afraid of doing my dismount, which was kind of risky. But I was still hoping to get in the Berlin Games.

Hodak: When did you decide that it wasn't possible for you to go on in gymnastics and try out for the '36 Games?

Bixler: Well, I could hardly hold my shoulder up and my doctor said, "No Dallas, don't you try out." See, it was a 500-pound pull on my shoulder and the doctor said that until I had complete control over my body I shouldn't do any further gymnastics. They said it was going to be two years, and in two years the Games would be well over in Berlin. So I figured I just couldn't go ahead and risk any

more injury. I had won all of the necessary events I needed to in order to enter the all-around, but the high bar is what gave me the most trouble.

Hodak: What sort of problems does this injury present for you now?

Bixler: For a long time I could not move my head in a certain manner. My head was at a ninety-degree angle for several years. Right now, I have numbers two, four and five vertebrae that are pulling and degenerating in my neck.

Hodak: How big of a disappointment was this for you to have to call it quits in your gymnastics career?

Bixler: It was awfully hard but I accepted it. But they still let me judge. I judged gymnastics for 44 years. I finally quit judging in 1975. I judged at colleges and other events of that nature. You had to do certain things to get into judging national competition. It wasn't open to everybody. I should add that I also helped teach Cathy Rigby when she was in Long Beach.

Then I joined the Merchant Marines in 1942. I went to Australia three times and over to Chile twice. I went to India and all around there. We also shipped horses over to India and they took those on over to Seoul. We were taking all of our horses out of Northern California and Wyoming and so forth. I also took a lot of things up from here to Washington and Oregon. They needed fuel and stuff up there.

Then all of the sudden they sent me over to Calcutta in India, what is now the British Islands, Ceylon, and other small towns and places. Then my wife, Virginia, told me that she was having our first baby and when I got to San Francisco to come home first. Gail, my daughter, wasn't expected to live. She was in very bad condition, her blood and so forth. So they said that they wouldn't send me back out on a ship as yet, so I could stay and see how our

daughter would get along. Four doctors said that she couldn't be saved. But our doctor, which was Virginia's cousin, said, "Oh, yes, you do what we ask you to do, Virginia, and we'll keep her alive." She's 43 now.

Hodak: Tell me, when did you meet your wife Virginia and when were you married?

Bixler: I met my wife in the Easter season in 1942. She came to California from Iowa in 1920 when she was just two years old. We got married in 1942. That was ten years after she had seen me in the Olympics. Then my sister had a big party at her house while I was still with the Merchant Marines, where I met Virginia. Then we got married and have been together for 44 years.

Hodak: Altogether how many children have you had?

Bixler: Three children.

Hodak: Did your children take up much of an interest in gymnastics or other sports?

Bixler: Well, none of them were really athletes. I really didn't encourage it. I figured it was up to them. Like me, my dad left me alone and said, "You're just going to be alright."

Hodak: How did your parents view your competition as a gymnast?

Bixler: Mother and dad liked it. They were at the Coliseum during the Games. They lived there on Muirfield Road just down from L.A. High School for many years.

Hodak: Okay, tell me what you did following your service in the Merchant Marines.

Bixler: I began my career in the Merchant Marines in 1942. At that time I was also working with a catering company in Wilmington. We served Navy parties. It was quite a large service because all these different battleships and other ships coming in the harbor during the war wanted to have parties. So the catering company served parties in Long Beach, San Pedro and at golf courses where we could have large services. We had others in Wilmington and Long Beach. One of my jobs was to see to it that the Navy and the Army were taken care of for these parties. So this was part of my duties and sometimes I wouldn't get home until two or three in the morning and maybe stay on board some of the ships that they were building in the harbor to take care of the other boats that we were serving. We took care of not only the ships themselves but we had to furnish all the dishes and other things that we needed on those large services to the Navy. It worked out beautifully. I worked with the catering company up until 1944.

Hodak: And what lines of work did you follow after World War II?

Bixler: After World War II, I bought a small restaurant and worked that for ten years. The harbor was just out of service at that time because the war was about over by 1945. I went over and became food supervisor for Disneyland and that worked out real good for me because they made me the supervisor over different parts of the park. They told me if I wanted to go to UCLA and go to school that would help a lot in the food division, which I did. In 1963 I went to UCLA and got my teacher's credentials and started to teach at a boys' school for the L.A. City Schools. It was a school for boys who had committed thefts and things of that nature. I started to teach commercial cooking. I taught for 12 years and only missed two days of work in that length of time. The state of California was very happy that I had only missed two days of teaching in 12 years so they gave me an extra six months and ten days onto my pension. They said they had never seen a person come in and miss only two days of teaching in 12 years. I've been collecting my pension since that time.



Hodak: At what point did you retire?

Bixler: I retired in 1975.

Hodak: And as you mentioned, you were a judge of gymnastics for 44 years. Let's talk about things you have observed over the years about the progress of gymnastics. Certainly it has progressed quite a bit within the Olympic Movement and is much more publicized than it was in your day. What sort of things have you seen about gymnastics that you'd care to mention?

Bixler: Well, gymnastics has come a long way. In 1932, we had the first and only time individual gymnasts were allowed to come out. We had the hill there in Baldwin Hills and we opened the first Olympic Village. It was marvelous. At that time, in 1932, Italy was the most outstanding, but we only had eight or nine countries competing in gymnastics. It has gone so far and so fast.

Hodak: And what about your attendance at a number of Olympics? Tell me which Olympics you've attended over the years and what things you'd care to mention about the Olympics.

Bixler: Well, I attended the 1960, '68, '72, '76 and '84 Olympics. We went to Mexico in 1968 and it was really handled beautifully. The city was just marvelous in serving everybody.

During the '72 Games, of course, it was just a terrible thing that happened with the terrorists. We were asked to come down for a special ceremony. They had an orchestra and things of this nature that just drew tears to your eyes. It was just something that was out of this world. In '72 I also learned much about the German people and their struggle when Hitler took over. We went through a lot of that with the family that we were staying with.

Hodak: And what of the Montreal Games?

Bixler: The Montreal Games were very, very good, I thought. With the exception, they never did finish the coliseum, and the seats were not finished so that you could really sit and watch all the events. But we really enjoyed the city of Montreal very, very much.

You know, we've always had to pay our way to all these things. A lot of people think that because you're a gold medal winner you get free rides. That is not true. And I am an athlete who happily gives his time. When that American flag would go up for the gold medal winners, it really made you feel real good that you had really done your part. That's the way it was with us.

I was president for two years of the Southern California Olympians and secretary-treasurer for seven years. And we do a great deal of fundraising in support of athletes. I've thoroughly enjoyed my involvement with SCO and think it's a fine organization and a fine group of people.

Hodak: Now, let's talk about the 1984 Olympics and your involvement in the Spirit Team and your participation in the torch relay. How did that come about?

Bixler: That came about at a dinner at a hotel quite early on. Bob Strock, from Coca-Cola, asked if I would run the torch for Coca-Cola, and I said yes. They gave us time to go to luncheons and it must have been two or three hundred mayors of Southern California that we had lunches with. We were busy with Coca-Cola, sometimes three times a day. It was very nice. I was asked to sign autographs for different sports events and other events that Coca-Cola was involved in, the kinds of things which they are doing very well again in 1988. At 74, I ran the torch for them. And I'd get up every morning at six o'clock and run around my streets in Buena Park preparing for it. I was running and swimming every day to get ready. I'd start out early and run my mile and a half and I got it down so I could do it in about 15 to 20 minutes. They said, "Well, that's fine because you only have to run one kilometer." That

morning, I started out to run and a boy from down the street was running across the street to catch a ride to go to work. He didn't see me and I didn't see him and he hit me so hard he knocked me from the sidewalk clear into the gutter. I thought, "Oh, gosh, this is going to put me out of the game for the torch run." He was sad as the dickens and his friend, who was going to take him to work, ran out of his car and over to me. He picked me up and said, "Are you alright?" I said, "Well, I think I'm alright." It turned out alright and I ran the torch finally for Coca-Cola.

Hodak: You ran the torch out in the Valley?

Bixler: Yes, out in the Valley. We had to be there at two o'clock in the morning. That was 49 miles from my home. They couldn't put you 100 miles away from your home but they could put you up to 49 miles away. So, sure enough, I got my torch run.

Hodak: You felt pretty strongly about that torch run?

Bixler: Oh, yes. The torch run, I think, was one of the finest things that we have ever done. And the kids got to go to the '84 Games and see and know what they're all about. And I've been to schools and to men's business organizations and things of this nature. Coca-Cola made me some folders that I could give to these people who come to listen to me talk about the Olympics, which I have been really fond of.

Hodak: When you go on these various talks, what are some of the things you stress about the spirit of the Olympics? What sort of things do you try to communicate to people?

Bixler: Well, I communicate to them especially about the boycott, where we didn't go to Russia in 1980. You have about 1,500 or 2,000 athletes that have worked awfully hard for years to be in the Olympics and to make their sport. But when Carter put off the athletes and said that they couldn't go to Russia, he hurt all of those boys and girls

who could not go to the Games. Also, there were people who would have hired them after they had been in the Games and so they lost all that potential employment. I figured that helped me a heck of a lot in getting future jobs. Anyway, a gentleman from Disneyland wrote an article on me that couldn't help but tell how I felt about our president at that time. Maybe that's the wrong thing to have done. But that really hurt 1,500 to 2,000 of our citizens; it hurt them as athletes and may have kept them from getting jobs that they would have had if they had been in the Games.

Hodak: What sort of thoughts do you have on the '84 Games and how they were handled?

Bixler: To me, they were handled most beautifully because it was the first time that the Olympics had ever had private enterprise to support them. We had the Spirit Team come out of that and I think we had a marvelous Spirit Team. They were right there with all this Olympic ability, doing what they could do to help the organization. And we had the ability to take a lot of kids on buses to the different areas of Southern California that they would not probably have seen otherwise.

Hodak: Certainly they benefit from meeting you.

Bixler: Well, I got a lot of thanks from the schools that I would go to. I would bring my films and was able to help them understand the Games better.

Hodak: You must be impressed with the routines gymnasts perform today.

Bixler: Oh, yes. When the Chinese brought the one-arm giant swing—I believe that was around 1979 or so—I was very impressed with that. I went to an international meet in Texas and I was amazed at the performances—the girls in particular. Since then the talent has continued to develop. I thought the '84 team the U.S. put together was our best all-around team ever.

Hodak: So you think the Olympic Movement is moving in a positive direction?

Bixler: Yes. And there is so much support now for the athletes.

Hodak: Any concluding remarks you'd like to make about the Olympics and sports in general?

Bixler: The only parting remark I have is that it seems like once an Olympian, always an Olympian. It's a fact.

Hodak: You feel a certain common bond to Olympic athletes today, being an Olympian yourself?

Bixler: Oh. yes.

Hodak: Well, I thank you for your time and your cooperation. And I certainly appreciate you showing me around your home museum here. I think it's fair to call it a museum of sorts. It's been my pleasure and privilege to have met and interviewed you.

Bixler: Thank you for coming.