Diann Wiesner: This is Lawrence Humble, in Hamilton, Montana on April 8, 1980. We’ll be talking about the fur trade in Montana. Maybe the bobcat is a good place for us to start, Lawrence. You must have seen a lot of changes in attitudes towards bobcats from the time you began trapping.

Lawrence Humble: Now you know, actually there’s no bobcats in Montana, they’re lynx cats.

DW: That’s right, now what’s the difference?

LH: About 350 dollars.

DW: (laughs) Now, you’re going to have to be more explicit for us.

LH: They have bobcats in Oregon, Washington and down south and back east, but they don’t have bobcats in Montana. There’s a lot of arguments on them but I said, well I got a thousand dollar check that you’ve never seen one in Montana, that’s for sure.

DW: So it’s the difference in the fur?

LH: Oh yes. They’re much hairier, the lynx cat, much lighter and much hairier.

DW: Are they any bigger?

LH: No, they grow about the same size.

DW: So we’re mainly talking about fur quality, when we’re talking about lynx cats and bobcats?

LH: The highest price paid for a bobcat was 75 dollars, and on the same sale one lynx cat got over 500, that’s the difference.

DW: That is a difference. When did you start trapping in Montana? As a kid, I suppose.

LH: In 1910.

DW: How old were you?
LH: Nine years old.

DW: Were you? What were you trapping for?

LH: Rats, and skunks, and weasels. Stuff like most kids.

DW: What got you started?

LH: Oh, I just loved to be outdoors and made some school money that way.

DW: Did your father trap?

LH: Not very much, not very much. He was quite a hunter—a hunter and a fisherman—but didn’t follow the trapping game.

DW: Were you living in the valley at the time, in the Bitterroot?

LH: Oh yes, I was born right out of town here, seven miles out of town.

DW: Yes, I’ve seen the family name in the local histories and everything.

LH: There was one right here in the paper yesterday.

DW: Is that right?

LH: Something about my great uncle helping start the Citizen’s Great bank in Hamilton [Montana], 1905.

DW: You have a brother here in town now, don’t you?

LH: No, he’s over living with his daughter now. In fact, he moved over there, Oregon.

DW: Oh, he did? He used to live here?

LH: Yes.

DW: Yes.

LH: Yes, the whole family was raised here, there was ten kids.

DW: Well, did you pick up this trapping on your own, Lawrence? Or—

LH: A lot of it.
DW: Did you have—was there a neighbor or something that trapped?

LH: Yes, there was neighbor here. It was the game warden who got killed by the Indian, Charlie Peyton.

DW: Had he trapped all his life out here?

LH: Oh yes, yes. He was an expert at it too.

DW: Oh, I see. Did he trap as part of his job as game warden or just on the side as extra income?

LH: Just on the side for an income, because game warden didn’t get very much money then.

DW: Yes. Boy, he must have been a game warden. Was he a game warden when you started trapping?

LH: Before I started trapping. He was killed before I started trapping. Yes, he was a neighbor of ours. My dad and he used to hunt together a lot.

DW: Goodness sakes. Did you hang around—did you go with him on his trap line, or how did you—?

LH: Oh, I used to trap them close by our place. I’d go out and always have a coyote or two in the trap.

DW: Nobody was trapping bobcats back in those days.

LH: No.

DW: Did a bobcat every get in a trap, get in a set?


DW: Twenty eight pounder? Yes, that is a good size.

LH: Judging by the claws. They always check the claws.

DW: I see. You were talking about that bobcat that you got in the aught trap, in the weasel set that time.

LH: Oh yes.
DW: So they weren’t worth anything then. You just had to—

LH: You’d get two and half for it.

DW: Oh, you did get two and a half? Were they using for the trim then?

LH: No, they’d just make a rug out of them.

DW: Oh. Somebody would—

LH: We put one in our chicken house up there. It was a Canadian lynx and we had it made into a rug. We had it for years. We used to have a good friend, who was a good taxidermist. He would charge us two and a half to fix it up. Yes.

DW: That was back in 1910 too, I bet. [Laughs]

LH: Wasn’t long after that.

DW: Yes, yes. So you started trapping when you were still in grade school.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: Where’d you sell your fur then?

LH: Oh, at different places. I usually sent most of it then to St. Louis.

DW: Oh, is that right?


DW: Send it through the mail?

LH: Yes.

DW: Yes, I see. How’d you ever find out about them?

LH: Oh, through newspapers.

DW: Was there a place in Hamilton at that time that you could sell fur?

LH: No.
DW: Missoula?

LH: Missoula you could, yes.

DW: But you could get better prices in St. Louis?

LH: Yes. Although, I did pretty well in Missoula we had a higher quality coyotes. Man by the name of Hallowell (?), buying in Missoula. So he’d give me five dollars extra to have my coyotes to help his quality, you know. He bought a lot of them from Washington and Oregon.

DW: Oh I see, to improve his lots.

LH: Oh yes. Often he’d ask me.

DW: Did you trap then, all the way through grade school and high school?

LH: I trapped for sixty five straight years. Yes.

DW: How did you work it out with school work? Did you go before school or after school?

LH: Both, after and before. We had some ponds right on our place where I trapped a lot. Skunks were all over the place, still are. Weasels are quite plentiful. You used to get about fifty cents or a dollar for a big one, you know. A good reason to trap.

DW: A lot of people don’t realize how much time trapping takes.

LH: Oh, it takes—

DW: Let’s see, you were out in the morning and evening, and then when did you take care of the fur?

LH: Oh after school, after I looked at my traps. In the evening, I’d take care of it.

DW: You’d do it that night when you got it?

LH: Yes.

DW: What was the trapping season like then? Did it go from the fall to the spring, or was it regulated at all?

LH: It wasn’t even regulated when I first trapped.

DW: When were the first regulations? Can you remember that?
LH: Oh, there wasn’t much regulation on trapping till after the war when there got to be so many trappers. It had jumped, oh, three or four hundred percent after the war.

DW: World War I or II?

LH: Two. After World War I, fur was awful high, the price was high.

DW: I read somewhere where the fur dropped in price during the war, though, because the markets weren’t there and so on, and then it raised and got high.

LH: The market was here during the war, I had five helpers per year during the war and right after the war.

DW: One or Two again, which war?

LH: After Two.

DW: Oh ok, because your prices were good during World War II?

LH: Oh yes.

DW: I read somewhere where they weren’t so good during World War I.

LH: No.

DW: Then they came back real high afterwards.

LH: After the war, they jumped right up.

DW: Why was that?

LH: Foreigners started buying our fur. That’s the reason that from 1978—’75 on up till this year, foreigners were buying all of the fur, 99 percent of it.

DW: This probably sounds like a dumb question, but I feel like—there’s probably logical answer, but I’m going to ask it anyway, Lawrence. Has the fur market always been determined by fashion, or was there a time when everyone wore fur because it was a way to keep warm? Do you know what I’m saying?

LH: Yes, and then they wore an awful lot of marten, fox, and stuff as throws, you know, just wearing fur.
DW: What do you mean by a “throw”? I’m not sure.

LH: You took marten skins, put together with a gold chain, you know.

DW: Just across the shoulders, and it was just for looks?

LH: Across the shoulders, yes.

DW: That would be what I would mean by fashion. Something that was just for looks.

LH: I sold a lot of my good beaver—match them and sell them as coats, you know, to doctors’ wives here in Missoula and people like that, some of the laboratory workers. Sold my marten and beaver, a lot of them that way.

DW: Last year, when I was at the legislature in Helena, there was a lobbyist over there wearing a full length beaver coat, and he was about my age, in his 30s. And you don’t see that many men in fur coats. Anyway, this fellow was wearing this full length beaver coat and I finally had to ask him, you know, where did he get that coat? It was pretty spectacular. And he said it was his grandfather’s. [Laughs]

LH: That’s the way with most of those beaver coats now; they don’t buy them like they did, you know. After the war, I had no trouble selling beaver coats, for the lining, you know, and trim. They were beautiful coats.

DW: What do you mean? Did you sell the coats or you mean the fur for the coats?

LH: I’d match them and then I’d take your measurements and ship them in. They were made up back in Minneapolis.

DW: Oh, is that right?

LH: By fur tanners and furriers.

DW: Well, I see. Was this for men and women, or mostly women?

LH: Mostly women.

DW: I’d like to have one myself. Well, backing up on our—trying to keep up with your trapping, did a lot of boys your age trap in school?

LH: Not too many.

DW: You kept it up?
LH: I stayed with it all this time. I made a lot of money during the school years trapping. I trapped a lot of stuff. Like when I took the contract, trapping beaver up in Big Hole. After I retired—must have been over 3,000 beavers, before I retired.

DW: When was this now? When did you retire? When were you trapping up in the Big Hole? In the ‘50s?

LH: Started before I retired. I started in ’56 because it was bothering them, so they couldn’t keep irrigation water. They had got so plentiful. Nobody was trapping.

DW: Who contracted you?

LH: Ranchers up the Big Hole. I knew a lot of them because I used to fish in there all the time. They knew I was a beaver trapper, so they got me to come up. I had a million acres under my jurisdiction.

DW: [Laughs] Did you move up there?

LH: No, I used to go up and stay a month at a time.

DW: I see.

LH: Catching 15 or 20 a day, you can’t do much running around to take care of them.

DW: No, you kind of have to be right there on the scene. That’s for sure. What kind of prices, Lawrence—people are always kind of interested about that—what kind of prices did the fur bring, say by the time you were in high school? Were you trapping—still trapping weasel, were they still bringing a dollar?

LH: No, they never did get too high.

DW: What was the best paying fur while you were trapping in school? Did that change from the time you started?

LH: Marten got up pretty high in 1928 and got up as high as—starting in 1919, they came up. Before that they were only getting a dollar, dollar and a half for a marten. They came up as high as 36 dollars.

DW: What a change. What type of article of clothing were they being used for? This was the European demand on them, was it?

LH: It was trimming on coats.

Lawrence Humble Interview, OH 099-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana–Missoula.
DW: Trim?

LH: Fancy coats, you know. Good quality marten—we have pretty good quality here—will take the place of the Siberian sable, you know? But now that Russians have slave labor catching sable and selling for 250 dollars. Back in 1919 and ’20 and all in there, sable was 500 or 600 dollars.

DW: A sable? Oh my lord. Well, this is sort of what I was wondering, is that marten and sable are kind of the same.

LH: Yes, they’re in there.

DW: But the marten has been used over the years more for trim than for full coats, like sable.

LH: Sable is one of the fanciest furs in the world. Sure make different colors when you put them up to the light and turn them. They look beautiful. Much larger than the marten, too.

DW: What are some of the other differences? Sables are darker color, aren’t they?

LH: Yes.

DW: And the fur is longer?

LH: Yes, long and dark, yes.

DW: Is the animal itself more the size of a fisher, say, than a marten?

LH: About the size of a fisher.

DW: Yes. What other differences would there be? That would probably be the main thing.

LH: The true sable is only in the Mongolian Siberia. So it’s under Russian control of them.

DW: What do you have up in Canada? Marten or sable?

LH: No, they’re just marten and fisher, like ours here.

DW: Okay. So there’s limited area of them then?

LH: Oh yes.

DW: Where did you go around here to trap marten? Did you—?
LH: Oh, I trapped on the east side mostly, some on the west side. I trapped on both sides.

DW: You mean the Sapphires [Mountains] and the Bitterroots [Mountains]?

LH: My long line was over on this side.

DW: Did you run a long line in high school, Lawrence?

LH: Oh, not too long. No, perhaps eight or ten miles was as long as I’d roam on weekends.

DW: Were you mostly on foot, even in high school?

LH: Oh yes. I had three cabins later on that I’d trap by too. It was a long line.

DW: You were trapping coyotes? When you first started out, you trapped coyotes?

LH: Oh, just Lameson’s (?). My neighbor showed me how to set a trap, so I’d catch one once in a while, you know.

DW: Was that mostly for the fun of it, or did you get some money for them?

LH: No, I didn’t get much for them; a dollar and a half, two dollars.

DW: Yes.

LH: Not much.

DW: Hardly. They just weren’t used for fur back then, were they?

LH: Not until 1928, when coyotes got valuable.

DW: Oh, is that right?

LH: I sold them as high as thirty dollars, that one.

DW: What were they using them for then?

LH: Just trimming. Pelts and so forth.

DW: That’s really interesting to me, that, you know, depending on what they could come up to do with it, you know, that just directly affects the market. There’s no getting around it. Let’s see, what else did you say you trapped? Weasel, coyote, marten, skunk—
LH: Mink.

DW: Mink, that’s right, and muskrat. How about muskrat? What was that—what would mink and muskrat do in those days for money? Starting out when you first started—

LH: I don’t know, but the dollar would’ve [unintelligible].

DW: Oh yes, I think we all know to keep that in mind [Laughs].

LH: I—when I first started, muskrats were only 35 to 50 cents, when I was a kid.

DW: But you could get quite a good meal for 50 cents.

LH: Oh yes. You could get a steak dinner for 50 cents right here in town. Thirty-five cents even.

DW: So that would be a real good thing. Muskrats are easy to take care of.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: They’re a good thing to start off.

LH: No trouble to skin them.

DW: How do Montana mink compared with other mink in the United States?

LH: Well, the best mink, of course, were in the Milk River section on into Canada, down through. There were mink in Lake of the Woods, Minnesota. Much larger and nicer mink than ours.

DW: I see, because of the more northern climate, then colder weather.

LH: Yes, and what they eat, too.

DW: And what they eat?

LH: Oh, it makes a difference. Different kinds of fish and stuff.

DW: Are they darker colored mink, by any chance?

LH: Much darker, much. The average males, some of them are 42 inches long.

DW: Oh, so they’re darker and larger?

LH: Much larger. A big mink here is 32 inches, makes an awful difference.
DW: When did mink ranching come into Montana? Do you remember?
LH: Right after the—started in 1932, along in there, most of it.
DW: There was some before then, but not as—
LH: Yes, limited.
DW: I see.
LH: There got to be bigger ranches. I had some friends that had a 160-acre mink ranch in the Lake of the Woods.
DW: Minnesota?
LH: Yes. They made a fortune on mink. In 1934, everybody’s going broke that had mink and foxes. Couldn’t pay for raisins. So they bought up all their neighbors for two and a half a piece, and when they sold them back in 1936, they got 500 dollars for them. Made a fortune.
DW: A lot of people tried to make ends meet trapping during the depression, didn’t they?
LH: Yes.
DW: Some of it was probably their only livelihood.
LH: The fur was awful low, come and go, you know.
DW: You were trapping then, what were you trapping then? Were you still trapping or had you begun fur buying at that time?
LH: I started fur buying when I was a senior in high school in the 1920s.
DW: Picking up local fur here, is that right?
LH: I did. I went out with a native Missoulan. He robbed an old man I knew well, Bernie Lorde (?). Good trapper on the east floor [Bitterroot Valley, Montana]. He gave him 20 dollars for some lynx that I knew were worth 80 dollars. I said, “I’m going to stop some of this business.” I started to buy them and the old man never would sell to him again.
DW: Is that right?
LH: Sold to me until he died. His kids sold to me afterwards. I’ve been buying fur for three generations on some families.
DW: Well, isn’t that something. You knew that you had a better outlet than Missoula?
LH: Yes, but you have to be half honest to keep in business.
DW: Yes and you—
LH: He was robbing them. When they found out somebody had robbed them, they wouldn’t sell to him again on a bet.
DW: Yes, isn’t that something. So then, did you start sending more fur to St. Louis than just your own?

LH: Well, St. Louis was the fur center of the United States then. For a long time.

DW: Yes, it goes back in the 1820s and ‘30s and ‘40s too, doesn’t it? These old trappers that you met, Lawrence—what was his name, Peyton?

LH: Charles Peyton, yeah.

DW: And Bernie Lorde (?)—did they ever talk about who they learned to trap from?

LH: Most of those old fellows, they just grew up with it, and boy they took pride in taking caring of stuff. You could tell they were old trappers, coming in here right now, and I would buy it for the resale percentage.

DW: That takes a lot of time.

LH: Oh yes, you have to spend a lot of time with it.

DW: I think a lot of people—they get into trapping these days—don’t realize that at first, you know, and they either, they adjust. They either get out of it or start taking their time.

LH: A lot of the trappers now, they don’t know how to take care. A lot of them won’t ask somebody. They’ll take a perfectly good beaver skin for 50 to 60 dollars and make a ten dollar hide out of it. You know, cutting it, not fleshing it right. It’s a crime. They shouldn’t allow amateur trappers to set the lines if they didn’t go to school, learn how to do it right.

DW: It sure makes a difference.

LH: It’s getting so crowded; they’re going to have to portion it out because I’m buying from 70 trappers. Used to buy from six or seven here in the valley and now I’m buying from 70 different ones. Too many.

DW: The resource isn’t going to be able to withstand that kind of pressure, is it?

LH: No, because it’s too easy to get to. Now, of course, they use snow mobiles and everything. They’re just [unintelligible].

DW: You were—I keep—it fascinates me because I know how hard it is to trap well. I’ve done just enough of it to know how hard it is. Now, I know that you picked up a lot from watching Charlie Peyton. Did I get his name right?

LH: Charlie.

DW: Yes, okay. Did you do any reading on it? Did you talk—were there any other men in the area that you talked to about how to make sets?

LH: Oh yes, some of the old timers, you know, used to trap a little.

DW: Who were some of them? Do you remember them?
LH: Yes, Frank Ginger (?), Dave Felix (?)—oh, there were quite a few of them. I can’t think of all their names.

DW: Yes, well maybe as we talk some more of them will come back. Did they trap for livelihood or did they trap in addition to ranching and working in town?

LH: No. One of them was a taxidermist, another one was just a farm laborer. When they were laid off in the wintertime, they could make more money at trap than they could working because the going wage in the wintertime was 25 dollars a month. I knew two of those fellows when I was a kid. They went out and trapped as many rats as they could in about a month and a half down at Corvallis [Montana]. Of course, there were a lot of rats in those days. They took 2,500 rats. Now I wouldn’t buy over 600 or 700 in the whole valley in a year. The most I bought, and I bought years ago, in one day was 4,400.

DW: Oh, goodness.

LH: Yes.

DW: When you were in the Big Hole—how many years did you trap beaver in the Big Hole for those ranchers?

LH: I took a ten year contract with them.

DW: Is that right? Would you go down there, what, every December or every—

LH: Usually the last of October.

DW: Oh, you’d do it in the fall when the water’s open and they’d be prime enough.

LH: They were as good as they should have been, but they were low anyhow because you only got about ten dollars if you took 20 a day. That’s good money then. Now you couldn’t afford driving around, the gas is so high.

DW: It’s going to change the trapping a little bit, I think.

LH: Oh, quite a bit.

DW: Yes, my husband and I tried to work a lot closer to home this year because of that. Instead of trapping for the whole season, we would just trap for a few weeks.

LH: That’s the way a lot of them are doing it.

DW: And, you know, it was mainly because of the gas.

LH: So many trappers—so many people laid off that’s beginning to trap.

DW: Yes, I’ve—working at the taxidermist, I’ve talked to two men this year that have never trapped beaver before and they’re trapping beaver this year. And I know that just has to be directly related to the economy. Plus, the fact that beaver prices were good this year.

LH: Oh yes, it’s much better now.
DW: Well, when the Fish and Game first started, Lawrence, they started with like one warden, and he had the power to hire like five deputy wardens, or something like that. I can’t remember. Can’t quite remember the date, but it was in the early 1900s, I think.

LH: Somewhere around then.

DW: Yes, and I also remember that when Montana became a state, I think the beaver was protected.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: It was protected. What do you recall about the changing of the laws pertaining to the beaver?

LH: Well, when I was a kid, it was absolutely against the law to trap a beaver. They got them down so low that you couldn’t find a beaver.

DW: That was a result of the early beaver trapping that opened up this country, was it?

LH: Yes. They were selling them to Europe for hats, you know. They were getting a pretty good price for them in those days. The first trappers that came through here. When they couldn’t catch over 90 beaver [unintelligible], they moved to Big Hole. Ninety a day.

DW: Ninety a day?

LH: Yes. So they got squaws taking care of their beaver and all they did was trap. So they hired the squaws to follow them. They went back—they had a four-horse wagon loaded with beaver skins—and they went back east and they made 6,500 dollars apiece. [Unintelligible because of clock chime]

DW: What time period are you talking about?

LH: Oh, around 1900, a little before.

DW: Oh, they could still find quite a few beavers.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: Yes, because you didn’t have your European pressure—

[End of Side A]

DW: Trapping traffic, you know, a lot of trapping, and you said there was a real heavy surge of beaver trapping in the early 1900s?

LH: Yes, there were an awful lot of people trapping beaver up around 1900. They just cleaned them out in places.

DW: I’m trying to remember—I should have brought my notes with me. When we became a state, and I’ll have to look that date up—it was in the late 1800s—they wrote, they didn’t have any game regulations. There was something there about paying bounties on credit, and some of the creditors, and the beaver was protected because its numbers were down. You had to have

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a, you know, a landowner’s permission, and it had to be because of loss of property, damage or rot, you know, due to know water.

LH: You had to get a permit. I had to do that the first four or five years I trapped.

DW: Was it pretty common? Was it pretty easy to get a permit?

LH: Oh yes.

DW: So they were still taking quite a bit of beaver? Even though—

LH: Oh, they got plenty of them. There wasn’t many beaver trappers. Nobody took interest in it, you know. The fellows that liked to trap beaver had no trouble getting a permit because a lot of the ranchers wanted them trapped out or taking part of them anyway.

DW: I’ll have to—do you remember when that was dropped and when it was again legal to trap beaver during a season, in a set time? Like from November to—

LH: 1928.

DW: Was it?

LH: That was when I got my first permit.

DW: I mean, when could you just trap beaver on a trapping license without getting a special permit?

LH: Well, up to the beavers got real scarce and they stopped the trapping on them. You didn’t have to even have a license.

DW: Yes, trapping licenses didn’t start until—was it the ‘20s or was it the ‘40s? I’ll have to look that up.

LH: I think I had to buy a license the first time in 1928 to trap beaver.

DW: Up until then you could get a permit because people wanted them trapped, yes.

LH: Licenses for hunting and fishing and trapping and everything were 90 cents. When they went to a dollar and ten, people hollered like the devil.


LH: That’s fishing and everything.

DW: There’s a—when I was reading through the logs on the Fish and Game, you know, through the years—and I haven’t finished doing it. It’s—I can’t remember what year it was, but one of the—there was a list of all the furbearers, the animals that were classified as furbearers, and one of them was the red fox. Do you remember when that changed? Because it’s, of course, considered non-classified now.

LH: Yes, they’re predatory animals.
DW: Yes, they had, you know, the otter, and the marten, and I can’t remember if the weasel is on there or not.

LH: No.

DW: And of course the beaver, and the lynx cat, and—I’m not sure if the lynx cat was on there.

LH: No.

DW: No, it wouldn’t have been.

LH: No.

DW: No? But anyways, the one I remember was the red fox because now he’s not considered a furbearer at all, as far as regulations go. And there’s a lot of pressure on him. A lot of people think that he’d be better off if he were considered a furbearer again. You must have trapped fox around here.

LH: The first year they got high, I caught 86 in 12 miles.

DW: When was that?

LH: Oh, about ’72 around in there. Nineteen seventy-four.

DW: Oh well, yes, but they’ve always been—I thought they’d always had brought a pretty good price because fox coats have always been—but I guess that wasn’t red fox.

LH: You didn’t trap fox down the river bottom like you can now. You had to go above 6,000 feet to find them.

DW: You’re kidding. I never knew that.

LH: It’s only the last few years since they hit the river bottom.

DW: Is that right? So you didn’t go after them as a youth because you were working on the bottom here.

LH: The only time I caught them was on the marten line above 6,000 feet. I caught quite a few fox.

DW: I never knew that. What did you get for them?

LH: Five dollars. When they got up to ten [dollars], I thought I was doing pretty good.

DW: Yes, I imagine. Well, did you notice a big jump in them after World War II, like with the other fur?

LH: Well, especially the silvers, they went up to 600 to 1,000 dollars. A good one was 5,000 dollars.

DW: So your big fox trapping didn’t start until the 1970s. That’s interesting. I tried on a fox coat, full length—it must have been for evening wear, way down here—a couple weeks ago at Beckman’s. We went to Beckman’s take pictures for the trapper education program of the

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finished fur. Actually, we’re doing this for the public, so they can see what goes into making a fur coat. And that fox coat cost 6,995 dollars.

LH: Oh, sure.

DW: That was quite a treat to see that coat.

LH: I also should mention that I bought fur from old man Beckman, one of the old men Beckman, starting in 1942. And bought it two years ago from Beckman, started to buy from [unintelligible] up at Bridger. A whole family of them [unintelligible] an old man and a boy. I sell them for the [unintelligible]. Of course, you know I buy them now for [unintelligible].

DW: I see.

LH: I’m offered 30,000 dollars a year to go buy for him in Missoula, but I turned him down. You know I wasn’t even—

DW: Yes, was this just a few years ago?

LH: Last year.

DW: Last year?

LH: Thirty-thousand dollars a year.

DW: All that experience, there ought to be something to it. To pay for all that.

LH: Last year, Tom and I made a lot of money, that is true. Last year and this year we 100 and oh, 120,000 dollars’ worth, 125,000. So we did all right last year.

DW: Tom was working with you last year? I didn’t know that.

LH: He was practicing teaching here recently.

DW: Oh.

LH: Helping me buy most of the time. He wanted to learn the business.

DW: Wonderful. Boy, that’s the only way to learn it.

LH: Oh, yes. Especially with every kind of thing I do. Buying for a lot of [unintelligible] and stuff. We sell coyotes. We bought 83,000 dollars of coyotes last year.

DW: Well, when you talk about the money in this fur trade, you really have to qualify when and what the money was worth and everything. Because—

LH: Oh yes, you could get hurt awful easy.

DW: Yes, and this year, you may have bought the same number of coyotes as last year, but there’s no money in it this year.
LH: No, I just bought one big bunch, 13,000 dollars. Seventy-nine since November and sold them right quick and made money on them. I’ll tell you about it. I gave him 40 dollars for the top.

DW: My.

LH: And sixteen days after, a lot of them went to 60 for the top.

DW: I know. I was in on a little bit of that this year.

LH: Got rid of them at the right time.

DW: That’s part of the name of the game, isn’t it, for the buyer?

LH: I beat that every time too because I always watch the market. One year, I hadn’t sold my beaver. I had a lot of beaver. I had done a lot of trapping and had 9,600 dollars’ worth. Nine-hundred dollar blankets. Three weeks after I sold them, they were 2,250. I guess 6,750 for mittens and all.

DW: I don’t want to ask an improper question, so don’t answer it if I am, but when one watches the market, what do you look for? Do you know what I’m trying to say? In other words—

LH: Supply and demand, yes. For sure.

DW: What starts telling you that the demand is decreasing? Do you have people that you can call?

LH: Oh yes.

DW: Your, let’s see, on your end?

LH: The one thing you got to watch—you see, like last year, a big crowd of European buyers, including Japan, France and all, rush in here to buy fur, you know. You better buy it, hold it a little while to make some money. That’s when they first got higher. I kept watching the market. So I held a bunch of them I bought before Christmas for, oh, 100, 135 dollars. I held them for three weeks and more than doubled the money. So you got to watch that.

DW: You knew because those buyers were coming in that there was a lot of interest.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: Sure.

LH: I drove through [unintelligible]. They watched the newspapers and told me that there wasn’t a place to rent because of France and all of them were sending the fur buyers for the big houses. [Unintelligible].

DW: [Laughs] That’s very straight.

LH: Like I told my fellow up above Darby there—he sold us 6,100 mink last year. I said, “You’re going to make some money this year.”
He said, “How do you know?”

I said, “Because the foreign buyers coming in with a flop.”

He said, “Yeah, they just called me and told me that every motel around close to here is taken up.” He made 300,000 dollars on his mink last year. I got 79 to 100 dollars. That was [unintelligible].

DW: That’s the mink ranch up around Darby?

LH: Yes. He said that three or four years ago, they lost 20,000 dollars because the price wasn’t as—he said last year and this year have really killed him. I think he had over 300,000 dollars’ worth this year.

DW: You were never into mink farming, were you, or mink ranching or whatever?

LH: I used to buy a few ranch mink when it first started, but now that’s a [unintelligible] set up—no more. Now they’re buying them and taking care of them over there. You know, they want them all stretches of life, so most of the people are just pelting them to send them over there—sell them—and letting them take care of them.

DW: What do you mean over there? Back East or—?

LH: No, most of it is done in Seattle.

DW: Oh, I see.

LH: Vancouver’s got a big place, too. Of course, there’s an awful lot of stuff that eventually goes through Jack Mendel (?) in New York. Few years ago, he and his two partners in three days sold over 8,000,000 dollars in fur. That’s a lot of fur in three days.

DW: Yes, that old mink coat still has been popular for a long, long time. When did the mink coats begin? Have they been around as long as there’s been trappers, or did there come a time, say after World War II, when that became the fur coat to have?

LH: Yes, that’s when you started seeing most of them. Once in a great while, you’d somebody with money to have a mink coat made up before that, even before World War I. But they were very scarce, very scarce. Then after World War II, as many people working in airplane factories and places, there were places selling mink coats by the hundreds.

DW: I bet you can trace it to that because by that time the mink ranches had time to come, had a large supply. Then we had a lot of people working and so on, making money after the—it was slow after the war for a year or two, but then the economy really took off.

LH: Over in Seattle—I asked a boy over there working for the government—he said every woman over there had a mink coat. Working in the airplane factories.

DW: That would’ve been from their working during the war, wouldn’t it?

LH: Yes.
DW: I see.

LH: They build up a little money, and then they want to put up a big front, so they all have mink coats.

DW: Isn’t that incredible. Yes. I wonder if before that—from the time you started trapping as a young boy to, say 1940—what were most of the fur coats made of?

LH: Beaver.

DW: Oh yes?

LH: And some otter coats, sea otter coats.

DW: That’s what we haven’t talked about too, is otter.

LH: And quite a lot of muskrat coats. Sold a lot of them.

DW: Is that what it was? Yes. See I grew up from the war on, and I mean, for years I never knew there was any other kind of fur but mink because I hadn’t grown up around trapping. I imagine a lot of people are kind of like myself.

LH: Sure.

DW: One of the things we’re going to be sure to demonstrate in the slide show about the fur trapping industry, and fur trapping as a whole, is the wild fur coats. We have raccoon fur coats and the fox coat.

LH: When I was a kid, there were lots of raccoon coats.

DW: That’s right, now that’s a big fur fashion that everyone knows about because it came out in the ’20s, and college kids were wearing them and things like that. Now, were there—there weren’t coons to trap around here were there?

LH: No.

DW: You didn’t get in on that.

LH: The first raccoon I caught here was 1942.

DW: Do you remember that? [Laughs]. Oh dear.

LH: I brought it up to the lab. The doctors wanted to take a look at it. They had never seen one, most of them. But I was trapping beaver and it ran up the tree, and I was carrying my pistol, so I shot it.

DW: Isn’t that interesting? They’ve been in eastern Montana all this time, though, but for some reason they weren’t out west.

LH: No, I think it came over from Lolo. That’s where I caught the first one.

DW: Oh, you think they came from out west, instead of the east?
LH: Yes, because the streams almost join up there and they travel by water.

DW: Gosh, I never thought about that. Yes. So you didn’t get in on the raccoon coat market at all then, as a trapper or a buyer?

LH: No. Sold a quite a few of them for, making hats.

DW: In the ‘40s?

LH: No, in the last three or four years.

DW: Oh yes. That’s right, because even though you caught that one in the ‘40s there still weren’t many around. So really there is an increase in raccoons.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: You’ve seen an increase in number. That’s the thing again, when you talk about this, you have to qualify so carefully because there may be more—well, there’s more red fox around here now, but there’s more people after them.

LH: It can be quite a show for some big red fox in the hills, you know.

DW: Yes. Raccoons, I’m thinking, there’s more of them, but there’s more people after them.

LH: Yes.

DW: Yes. We’ve taken a few with our hounds, but we don’t take them regularly, because they’re pretty easy to get with hounds. There aren’t enough of them around, so we’ll usually limit ourselves to—if there’s a bunch of them, we’ll only take one.

LH: There were two fellows out here, who caught two families of them running across the field, turned the hounds loose, and killed all ten of them.

DW: Oh, sure.

LH: Wiped them out.

DW: And back East, apparently, they can sustain real high prices, their coat.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: But boy you can’t think of back East out here. Ed has gotten—you know, he’s been writing every month in the Trapper—and he’s gotten a lot of letters from other trappers around the country about coming out here and trapping here because they say this is a big state, you know, there’s so few people. And he’s written them back and answered every one of them himself. He said, “You know, we have a lot of land and we don’t have a lot of people. But we don’t have the fur either. It’s a harsh climate and—”

LH: Louisiana catches more fur in one year than all the Northwest.

Lawrence Humble Interview, OH 099-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana–Missoula.
DW: Well, sure. It’s another thing that I don’t think the general public is aware of. Oh I don’t know, I suppose we have more coyotes than a lot of states, used to have more lynx cats than a lot of states.

LH: When lynx cats were so high, I knew where there were several families. I caught 18 of them just in a few days, but I got good money for them, and before that I wasn’t trapping them.

DW: They’re not as difficult to trap. They’re harder to run with the hounds in this country because of the mountainous terrain.

LH: The rocks, you know.

DW: Boy. They really—because of the fashion—really had the pressure put on them. I don’t know, someone said that they thought people were going to get tired of those spotted cat coats.

LH: I think that’s true now.

DW: Do you?

LH: Because Swiss (?) last year, he bought 62 percent of the cats from the United States. He sure is walking around with his hands in his pockets. He said, “I’ll buy them when they get down to near 200 dollars and offer four.” But he got most of them. Last year they were begging for every one they could get at any price, but—

DW: Yes. It’s a basic supply and demand right now. And if the person’s going to put 10,000 or 20,000 dollars into a coat, they don’t want to see a whole lot of other ones like it.

LH: Some of these spotted cats from Montana here, coat made out of them last year cost 90,000 dollars.

DW: I saw an article in a magazine about that, but I didn’t know if that was true, I guess.

LH: Well, I think this foreigner that was buying them said they go as high as 90,000 dollars. Forty-thousand for the second. They’re using these bellies on the big, light-dark coyotes. He was excited about the look so much because they put the spots on them. Made a lot of money on coyotes.

DW: Just the way they want. I heard that. You’re talking about coyotes, spotting on the white belly. Boy, just think about that bobcat—lynx cat—I got to get this right. Lynx cat is so much silkier. Of course, I’m not very familiar with Eastern coyotes. They’re quite a bit silkier than ours over here.

LH: Best coyotes in the United States are Montana and Alberta.

DW: They do have quite a different texture.

LH: Oh, yes.

DW: Yes, I guess I could see—
LH: I bought 3 or 4,000 dollars’ worth from one fellow [unintelligible]. Caught them in the Centennial [Centennial Valley, Montana]. Naturally, they were the best coyotes.

DW: Did you?

LH: Some of them weighed as much as 55 pound. Monsters.

DW: Those coyotes brought the highest prices of the fur sale this year.

LH: Oh yes.

DW: They got a few of them.

LH: Last year, Tom and I paid 170 dollars for a lot coyotes and made a lot of good money on them.

DW: Isn’t that marvelous? That’s sort of good because the way I see it, from what I’ve heard, the coyotes need to be kept in balance.

LH: Oh boy, they were killing all the calf elks and the deer here.

DW: That’s right, we read your letter at the meeting in Missoula in 1978, I think it was.

LH: Yes, you can see the difference. I’m buying the elk and deer skins, there’s so much difference. They increased 300 percent, the younger ones, the last two years since they’ve killed so many coyotes. You got 450 coyotes around here. Northeast of Corvallis, there’s an area where they caught 450 coyotes.

DW: My word.

LH: I used to trap all winter to get 20. Would shoot a few. I got 25 on a big year. Now that’s nothing; I go out and kill 25 in a day.

DW: Yes, I saw that too this year. I saw pilots cutting the furs. Pilots and gutters, they usually work in pairs like that. Coming with the furs, they’d have 200 coyotes.

LH: I was talking to a friend working out of Glasgow last year and he said they were having some battles up there. Cutting farmers’ fences and just raising the devil.

DW: Yes, it’s like a lot of things. It can sure be easily abused.

LH: Oh yes, that’s been going on forever.

DW: I think the trappers, a lot of them, have really kind of resented the era of hunting because, sharing the same resource or whatever. Loss of profits.

LH: I bought some fur from an old trapper last January. He’s trapped for about 60 years. A little younger than I am, but he’s trapped a good 60 years. I bought fur from him and there, just standing there, he said he’s all done. He says he can’t set a trap without five or six more being right around. It’s no fun anymore.

DW: Yes. It sure ruins it for you.

Lawrence Humble Interview, OH 099-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana–Missoula.
LH: But he’s a good trapper. He just traps around Darby there. He’ll pick up 1,000 or 1,200 dollars on what other guys pass right up, catching beaver, and fox, and cats, and everything.

DW: Did you tell me when you started trapping beaver? Did you tell me when you got your first permit?

LH: Nineteen twenty-eight.

DW: Yes, I want to keep that in mind.

LH: That’s the year I caught the biggest beaver I ever caught in my life.

DW: Oh, you did that first year?

LH: It was 84 pounds.

DW: And you’ve topped it? Isn’t that incredible?

LH: In 3,006, I never caught another one that weighed over eighty pounds. I weighed two more that weighed 78 and 79 pounds. And that’s a big beaver.

DW: I would think so. Anything in the 70s. Wow, that’s incredible. How far up did you trap for marten? How much higher did you have to go than the valley here? Did they used to be lower than they are now? They still about the same?

LH: They used to stay back more than they are because they transplanted a bunch of fishers over here. That was a fool thing to do. Forest Service and the Game Department, to kill off the forestry pine. They’re a lot bigger than marten, you know, fishers. They live on marten. The trappers all discussed it. The fishers were chasing the marten clear down into the river bottom. They were catching marten in the mink traps.

DW: Goodness. When was this? When did they transplant these fishers?

LH: Oh, several years ago.

DW: Oh, just recently?

LH: Yes. They were extinct here. I never saw one when I trapped. Until, oh, 15 years, 20 years ago, something like that, they transplanted a whole bunch of them. Trappers were catching them. It’s against the law to have them, you know. Some of them got fined. Their neighbors would turn them in if they got some fisher.

DW: Really hard on the marten, huh?

LH: Oh yes.

DW: God, keeping a balance is pretty tough, isn’t it?

LH: Oh yes, you go out of line with it, you can’t do it. But the wolverines they put in here, they’re no good either.

DW: When did they do that?
LH: About the same time they did the fishers. I don’t know exactly what year. We didn’t use to have the wolverines or the fishers. Oh, we did when I was a kid. We had a few of the wolverines, but they got all killed out I guess. They planted some more of those. Wolverine, not a choice, so I don’t like it. Never made any money last year on wolverine, we lost money.

DW: Oh, is that right? I always figured there weren’t enough of them to make enough coats or something, you know, but they use the trim or something. It’s supposed to be such good, good trim.

LH: During the frost. It’s a good coat for turning the frost up in Alaska. Some of the trappers use wolverine caps.

DW: That’s what I’ve always heard about them, yes. You didn’t trap marten then when you were in high school?

LH: No.

DW: Oh no, you did, I’m getting mixed up. Did you trap marten when you first started trapping?

LH: Nineteen-nineteen, we caught a few before they were high.

DW: Okay, that’s right. We were talking about—because I figured that you’re living right here in the valley bottom and walking your line, so you can’t be leaving, going very far on foot.

LH: No, I used to walk over here. The marten would use at least a couple of these closer creeks, so I got six or maybe ten marten a year.

DW: Once the prices started getting up there. You’d only have to go—how far up Blodgett [Blodgett Canyon in the Bitterroot Mountains] did you have to go?

LH: Oh, about a mile and a half.

DW: And they’d come down and cross at the bottom?

LH: That’s usually where I caught them.

DW: I like the marten trapping because the traps are small and the animals are small, and they’re easy to take care of.

LH: Pretty fur too.

DW: And it is really pretty fur. They look so nice when they’re all dried. A few years ago—I can’t remember if we sold those marten down here or not. A few years ago Bob and I ran a four mile line and checked it twice a week.

[End of Interview]

[Tape begins again, but quality is poor and voices are inaudible]