Jane Benson: I’m talking today with Mrs. Alma Thompson, who is the widow of Boyd Thompson. Mrs. Thompson, let’s chat about when you first—you and your husband—first went to work for the Remount Depot. That’s what we’re interested in mostly is when Mr. Thompson was there. Whatever you can remember about it.

Alma Thompson: I can remember that he worked there for several years off and on. Finally, they wanted him to come to the Remount to supervise the packing strings. I can’t remember really just how long. It was several years though that he worked for them, off and on.

JB: As a packer?

AT: No, he done whatever they needed for him to do. He was on a ranch in the Big Draw with Needle Smith. He worked with him for one winter I think. They had to do some building and this Needle Smith looked after the stock on the ranch there.

JB: Is that when the Forest Service had the Big Draw?

AT: Yes, the Forest Service. It wasn’t a Forest Service at that time, but he was there and they had this lease.

JB: Do you mean that your husband worked at the Big Draw for the Forest Service or do you mean that he had worked for Mr. Smith before the Forest Service had the Big Draw? Which do you mean?

AT: What?

JB: Do you mean that your husband worked up in the Big Draw before the Forest Service ever had it?

AT: Yes, he did there. He worked there some. Then he worked on some packing trips. That I don’t know where it was from. I can’t remember that far back.

JB: It is a long time isn’t it? (laughs)

AT: He just worked off and on like, or when they brought the pack strings in or stuff like that.

JB: That was down in the Ninemile, wasn’t it?
AT: Yes, that was down in the Ninemile.

JB: When they first opened up the Remount Depot at the Ninemile, I know that your husband was put in charge of breeding saddle horses.

AT: Yes, he was.

JB: Right away?

AT: Yes.

JB: Was that up at the Big Draw, or were they doing that down at the Ninemile?

AT: They were doing that down at the Ninemile.

JB: Did you actually live down there at that time? Did you and your husband live down there?

AT: He was there part of the time. He was there for a year or two before I moved down there. He told them that he would not work there anymore if he didn’t have a place to live and bring his family. So they built a house an eighth of a mile above the Remount.

JB: I know which house you mean. I’ve been past it.

AT: You know it? We rented that, 15 dollars a month.

JB: It’s a nice house!

AT: It was a real nice house.

JB: So that was built...

AT: We lived there for six years. He was supervisor of all the pack strings and everything that comes and goes in during the season right at the station. He worked right at the station all of the time. He had to manage everything. There was the head guy there, but he got by doing all of this stuff.

JB: This would have been right at the beginning, when Mr. Fickes was in charge?

AT: Yes.

JB: You must know Clyde Fickes?
AT: Yes. It was about that time. At that time they didn’t have the buildings there. I don’t remember just what kind for the men that stayed there. They didn’t have all these nice buildings: a bunkhouse, and all of that.

JB: But the old ranch was there?

AT: Yes.

JB: There were old ranch buildings and I believe they built some temporary buildings for the men.

AT: Yes, they built some temporary buildings. Then they built that up and finally put...the first man they put in charge out there...if I could think of his name now...

JB: The first superintendent was Charley Butler.

AT: Was who?

JB: Charley Butler was his name. He stayed only a few months though. You may not have known about Mr. Butler.

AT: I didn’t know about him.

JB: Then it was Jake Williams.

AT: That was the one. Boyd went to work there for him...for Jake Williams.

JB: That would have been maybe 1933 about?

AT: Along in there. I think he was there for a little while after I got down there. Then they moved away and they put another fellow in charge, but I don’t remember Jake Williams.

JB: Do you remember Mr. Williams?

AT: Yes. I remember him.

JB: You lived then in that house for about six years?

AT: Yes, we lived in that house from ’35 to ’41.

JB: Okay, because I was going to ask you how long your husband had been there. I didn’t know how long he’d stayed.
AT: He was there steady at that time.

JB: Until ’41?

AT: Then he got crippled. He got a hernia from lifting. He worked the CCs [Civilian Conservation Corps] quite a lot—boys. They had a CC camp there a little ways and they used the CCs quite a bit. Anyway, this binder, they had just a binder. You know what they are?

JB: To bind hay?

AT: To bind grain. They were moving that, and some way it got into a hole or something. These men were all lifting on it, and it started to fly back. Boyd didn’t let loose quick enough, and it hit him in here...Ever since then, he’d have an operation every year, all the years we lived there, for that hernia would break out again. He’d be off and on sick leave. The last one he had, they said he’d have to quit work.

JB: Was that ’41?

AT: Yes. They said he’d have to quit. He said if I have to quit, then only thing we...The ranch, we still had the ranch.

JB: Where was that?

AT: Down at Niarada, near Hot Springs. He said if I have to quit, we’d have to pay that 15 dollars a month. I wouldn’t have any work to do and what little I got from the government, we couldn’t make it living. The children were all gone but one. Obviously, they were going to school or they were married. Most of them were married. Bonnie, this one I was telling you about had come from Denver. She was seven years younger...my youngest daughter. That’s all we had at home when we went back to the ranch. Anyway, he said he’d have to quit. How would it be if we went back to the ranch and just start right from scratch again?

JB: So is that what you did?

AT: Yes, that’s what we did.

JB: Went back up to Niarada?

AT: Went back to Niarada and stayed there until in ’60...’56 or ’57, we were over at the lake. We had a place on the Flathead Lake. We bought a house, and it was just a...there was nothing in it, just a farmhouse. We had to have it all fixed up, remodeled, and we moved there. We lived down there for about 11 years. But he’s sick. He had this emphysema. You know what that’s like. It just goes gradually.
JB: In the lungs?

AT: Yes, in the lungs. I had him so many places trying to do something for that. There is no cure for emphysema seems like.

JB: When did Mr. Thompson die?

AT: That’s what he had.

JB: When was that that he died?

AT: Before we left the Remount. It was just like a cough at first. It was before we went to the Remount. That cough got pretty bad and his doctor sent him over to Galen, to the doctor over there. They pumped his lungs up. Then he’d done good for a long time. Then it just kept coming back and each cough was so bad all the time. First, he was a heavy smoker. He finally quit smoking, but it was too late. It had too bad a hold on him. He was able to work. He could work. Then they had the Depression, and we couldn’t make it on the ranch. We had to sell stock and everything. Then he went to work for the Remount.

JB: Your husband had been in the ranching business for quite a while.

AT: Yes, Boyd was a rancher ever since we got married. We lived up in Kalispell. I was born and raised up there.

JB: Where did he come from?

AT: I think he was born in Iowa (?).

JB: He must have known a lot about horses.

AT: That’s all he did know was horses and cattle. We would run quite a few cattle.

JB: He was put in charge of...

AT: He was put in charge of the Remount right there.

JB: Can you tell me some of the things that he was responsible for?

AT: He was responsible for...When they sent pack strings up, they had to keep track of every pack saddle, and every halter, and everything that went out. He had to keep track of that and, when they came back in, to report the loss, if there’s any loss. If someone did lose something, it all had to be reported.
JB: Would it be his job to send out a packer and a string of mules when there was a fire call?

AT: Yes, he would send out a pack string with a guy with them. He didn’t go himself, he just had to watch these, take care of these.

JB: Had he packed, too? Had he been a packer?

AT: Yes, he packed years before that. When we were still on the ranch, he used to pack on fires.

JB: For the Forest Service?

AT: No...well, yes, it was kind of for the Forest Service I guess. He packed to the mountains and around by gosh (?). But that’s all he knew. That was his life. His folks were ranchers, too. That’s all he knew was horses and cattle and ranching.

JB: Had he worked with mules before?

AT: With who?

JB: With mules?

AT: Yes, he’d worked some with them. He loved the mules. He got along fine with them, but a lot of the people didn’t.

JB: No, I don’t think everybody does. (laughs) He must have been there then and also responsible for breeding the saddle horses?

AT: Yes, that’s one thing he was responsible for.

JB: Did they do that right there at the Remount Depot?

AT: They did that right there at the Remount.

JB: Do you remember any of those horses?

AT: I don’t remember that.

JB: Don’t you?

AT: No. I never asked many questions about...I did hear the names of some of them (?). But I don’t remember. Clyde Fickes—he can tell you more than anybody.

JB: Yes, I talked with Mr. Fickes and a couple of other people about that time.
AT: When we first moved down there—when we first started working there—Clyde was some kind of a manager. He had to oversee something about the buildings and stuff at the Remount there. He was in Missoula. You probably know all about that.

JB: I’d like you to tell me about it. I think you may know things about it that I don’t know.

AT: I don’t know just what he had to do. I know Boyd said he was out there at different times. They rode their horses and things like that. Of course, he didn’t have anything to do with that out there.

JB: You must have been there all during this time when they were building these new buildings.

AT: Yes, he was there.

JB: Did you watch all that construction?

AT: No, it was done when I went there.

JB: By the time you got there?

AT: He lived there and they had a little cabin to live in, a little place.

JB: You didn’t move out yourself, until those buildings were all in.

AT: No, those buildings were all in.

JB: What did it look like?

AT: What?

JB: What did it look like?

AT: It looked nice.

JB: Can you tell me...?

AT: They had a nice bunkhouse and they had a cookhouse. In the Lolo Forest, they had a building set over just a little ways. It was a family building. Then there was the family building that the overseer, whoever he was, for the whole thing, lived in. Jake Williams was the first one I knew of who lived there. Then that Cap Evans, he was there quite a while. That’s where we became such good friends, us and the Evans.
JB: Ye. He told me you were up here. That’s the reason I called you and knew that you were here was he had told me about how you were living up here and might have some information. I’ll tell him hello from you next time I see him. If you were there until 1941, you must have also known Ed MacKay. Do you remember Ed MacKay?

AT: I don’t remember very well. I’ve met him I guess, but I wouldn’t have known him really.

JB: Didn’t he come about 1940, ’41?

AT: Yes, something like that. I never saw him.

JB: But it was during that time? I’m trying to get some things straight.

AT: Yes, it was during that time, some time. Cap Evans got...he was there. On Sundays, a lot of the time, there’d be a bunch come out and put on shows on riding and sleighing and things like that.

JB: Up in the back, on that hill?

AT: Yes. They had a sleighing party. It was on a Sunday. They shouldn’t have been doing that because that wasn’t a work day. That wasn’t on the Forest; that was on your own. They had this sleighing party, and I know that Bud, he didn’t like it a bit. They just let them toboggan down those hills.

Long afterwards...I guess it must have been...he just watched, he didn’t ride any. He said he didn’t care about it. Anyway, he had to watch to kind of watch the bunch. He stayed there until I guess about five o’clock, and he came home. “Well, thank goodness,” he said, “This is a day that’s over that sure has worried me.”

It wasn’t ten minutes after that he got a call that Cap had broken his back sledding. Got thrown off, broke his back. He had to go back down and they took him to Missoula. He lay in that hospital for I don’t know how long—an awful long. Boyd had to take his place in the office and everything. That was quite a challenge.

JB: Had this been guests of some of the employees who came out to sled? Who was it that wanted to have the sledding party?

AT: I don’t know. It was just some of the people that were in town, the Forest Service people.

JB: Then your husband had to take charge for a while.

AT: Yes, then he had to take charge of all of everything that was going on and take care of the time and everything for the men. Then they got another fellow in there. I can’t remember his
name now. He wasn’t there for very long. Cap thought he was going to get to come back, but they didn’t let him come back. I don’t know. Then it was right after that Boyd got hurt so bad. I don’t remember who was in there. I can’t remember the name.

JB: Sounds like they lost two good people about the same time. When you lived up at the house, did you have some of your children up there then?

AT: Yes, we had the two younger girls, next to Bonnie. They were both in high school.

JB: Where did they go to school?

AT: Then there’s Hazel. We moved to Alberton in ’35 in February. The next spring, while we were there in Alberton, Hazel—that’s my oldest daughter—she got married. She married a boy from Big Arm. In February, we moved to the Remount. Shortly after we moved to the Remount, Lauren—that’s our oldest one and our only son—he was going to the university. We moved up there. That was in February. He brought his wife and introduced her to us, and then he was married.

That left just the three girls, the two older girls and Bonnie. Bonnie was seven years younger than the youngest of those two. Them two were just two years apart. Margie—that was the one next to Bonnie—she was in the eighth grade when we moved to Alberton. Of course, they were just starting school. She asked somebody where the eighth grade room was; she didn’t seem to be able to find it. They looked at her. She was real small. She was little, real tiny. She isn’t very big yet. Five feet two inches I think is all. Anyway, they said, “You don’t belong in eighth grade. You belong to sixth or seventh, don’t you?” That made her mad. (laughs) She said, “I’m in eighth grade, and I want the eighth grade room.”

Then, the other one, she was older, and she was in high school, two years older. I had those three girls while I was at Remount. The older one got married before we left there, after she got out of high school. The other one got a job in Missoula, working for the White Pine.

JB: They went to high school in Alberton then?

AT: Yes, they finished in Alberton. Of course, they rode a bus. Ninemile had a bus there for school kids. Bonnie was the youngest one. She was only five, but determined to go to school. She didn’t want to stay home alone.

JB: Did you enjoy living up there?

AT: Yes, we enjoyed it very much. Easiest time you ever had. I didn’t have anything to do. I kept the CC boys moving along and kept things up around the buildings. It was just the three girls and us there. I enjoyed it. We didn’t get very well acquainted. Mrs. Evans, her and I were very good friends. Of course, he was the boss. We used to try to go to their clubs or something like
that. We went a time or two, but they were quite clannish some people. I don’t know why: they thought we were too good for them or what. I wasn’t any different than they were...

JB: You mean the families...

AT: They treated us pretty cruel.

JB: You mean the families there in the valley, in the Ninemile valley?

AT: Yes, the clubs they’d have. We thought we’d mix with them, but we went a couple times and then both quit. That was enough. Froze us out. They’re clannish.

JB: Yes, you were the new folks. While you were there, were there any field days or packers’ days, or anything like that?

AT: No.

JB: There had been before that, packers’ days, where the men would demonstrate their packing.

AT: I think they had a show or two in Missoula, if I remember right, but I never went to any of them. I don’t really remember much about that. I did have a lot of pictures. When Bonnie was here last time, I had a little album that was full of pictures in the five years we lived there, all our horses and our mules, and different things, and Bonnie as she grew up. I gave the album to her because I thought I’m getting old. I got to give some of this stuff to some of the kids.

JB: We’ve been able to get quite a few photographs. People have saved them and we’re getting some photographs from time to time.

AT: I’ve got a box of pictures up at the house where my daughter is staying. That’s got a lot of good Forest Service pictures. That don’t do me any good here though. I just left them there.

JB: If we find that we just don’t have pictures of certain things, could we perhaps give you a call or your daughter? There might be some pictures there. Would you be willing to loan them?

AT: I really don’t know. I’d have to see. I haven’t looked in that box in ever so long. There are pictures there from years and years back.

JB: You must have watched those big trucks.

AT: What?

JB: Do you remember the big trucks that hauled the stock out?
AT: Yes.

JB: They must have been new when you were there.

AT: Yes, that was all pretty new.

JB: Did you watch them load up the mules? The pack strings?

AT: A time or two I did. One time, I know his brother was there.

JB: Boyd...your husband’s brother?

AT: My husband’s brother from California. When he was visiting, he was up at the house. I got a call that there was a fire call and they wanted a truck load of mules. He had to be on duty all the time. He didn’t have time to himself at all. He went down there and we went down, too, the rest of us, because his brother wanted to watch it. It was quite fascinating for him to see Boyd getting those mules out and then the (unintelligible) go with him and all of the stuff, and the pack saddles, and all of the junk they had to take along, feed and everything.

JB: They must have worked fast.

AT: They did. They had to. They had to work fast.

JB: Do you remember where they were going on that fire?

AT: No, I don’t remember.

JB: It could have been any place.

AT: It could have been any place because they had so many fires: so many in so many different places up in the hills.

JB: When they moved the winter range from the Big Draw down to Perma, did your husband ever work at the Perma winter range?

AT: No, he was still there then. They had that place going alright, but that didn’t have any connection with Boyd’s...with the Remount.

JB: He stayed in the Ninemile all the time?

AT: Yes, he stayed at the Ninemile, but they did move their stock down there.
JB: Yes, I know they did. That’s why I was wondering if he might have gone over.

AT: He was down there at different times. I know, one time, the kids were having some kind of party. They used a ferry to go across. They wanted to go down there and see that. In fact, (unintelligible), the old fellow that was working there was working down there, too. She kind of wanted to, I guess, go see her beau. We went down there for just a little while to see when they came back.

JB: Did you ride the ferry?

AT: No, it was on its way back with the bunch.

JB: You just watched it come across?
AT: Yes.

JB: I drove past there today and I, of course, couldn’t see...there’s nothing left of the ferry, but I could see the area where it was, and I could see those corrals over there.

AT: I don’t think the Forest Service owns much down there anymore.

JB: No, they don’t.

AT: They’re done with all the mules and everything. This is all done by plane now.

JB: Yes, it is.

AT: They have roads in so many of the places; they don’t need pack strings anymore. They have trucks.

JB: Yes. Did you ever go to that winter range down at Perma? On the road or anything?

AT: No, nothing (?) was there. I’ve been by there lots of times, that is, on the other side of the river, but I’ve never...

JB: When they moved all the stock over to Perma, did that change your husband’s job?

AT: No, Boyd, about that time, he helped to take them down, after the fires were all over. He’d helped to move the stock down, if they had to drive them down there. I don’t know about different times.

JB: He went on those trail rides?
AT: Before we moved down there, they used to call him to come down and help move a bunch
of the stock.

JB: On these trail drives across?

AT: Yes.

JB: What I was wondering is, if he had been in charge of breeding some saddle horses
earlier...did they move those saddle horses also over to Perma?

AT: I don’t remember what they had done with them. I really don’t remember.

JB: This is what I’m trying to figure out, too. That’s...

AT: I kind of lost track of all that stuff after we had moved away from that ranch. We were too
busy trying to make a living.

JB: (laughs) I imagine so! It has been a long time, but I’m really glad to talk to people like you
because you saw all of that and some of us are never going to see it.

AT: That’s been so long ago and so many things have happened since then.

JB: Did you know Walt Perry? He was a horseman.

AT: I just knew him. That’s all. Boyd knew him really well.

JB: Yes, I’m sure he did.

AT: I didn’t know him very well.

JB: Mr. Perry used to break a lot of the stock out there, broke the horses.

AT: Yes, I know. When I hear the name, I’ve heard of them, different ones that’s worked there.
There was another old fellow that worked in the blacksmith shop. He was just wonderful and I
can’t remember his name now.

JB: Do you mean Dave Pronovost?

AT: That was the one. He did all of their blacksmith work. He was just a wizard at that. One
thing is he didn’t have to stoop far. He had real short legs and a long body. The work that fellow
put out was just wonderful. Of course, they had other pretty good shoers, but he was one of
the main ones.
JB: Was he?

AT: Yes.

JB: Did your husband do any shoeing?

AT: Yes, he had done some, but he didn’t have time for very much. They didn’t want him to anyhow. They had other guys to do that. He was good at that, too. Of course, he had done a lot of that when he was on the ranch. People used to bring their horses there and get them shod. Boyd says, “I guess I’m a darn (unintelligible). I furnish the nails and I furnish the shoes and I don’t charge them a thing! (laughs)

JB: He must have been pretty good.

AT: He was. Everybody depended on Boyd to shoe their horses. He had a little blacksmith shop of his own. He did all of his own repairing on the machinery out at the ranch and stuff like that. We always did that ever since we had learned it (?).

[End of Interview]