Oral History Number: 099-003, 004
Interviewees: Lester Barton and Tex Baker
Interviewers: Edd Nentwig and Diann Wiesner
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Note: This audio contains two interviews, one with Lester Barton and a brief conversation with Tex Baker. The discussion with Baker likely happened in a moving vehicle given the background noise. Also, a small portion of the interview with Barton occurs at the very end of the audio so it may have been conducted at a later date.

Lester Barton: He was up there in the dark. So I went in and I hollered, asked him if he was there. He recognized my voice right away and went in, and I told him who I had picked up. He went down to the bar, and we had court and he told the fellow, he says, "I'm so mad right now because you were trapping beaver in my fishing hole." He says, "I can't fine you today. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

Edd Nentwig: The judge told this guy that?

LB: Yes. He says, "You'll have to come back tomorrow." He said, "I'm too mad." He say, "That's my private fishing hole." He was fishing the beaver dam down there. He just done everything, and he didn't want no help.

EN: Even without his eyes, he could do all that stuff?

LB: His eyes was completely gone.

EN: How'd that happen?

LB: It was blasting caps.

EN: Oh, was he a miner up there?

LB: Well, he was, I imagine he was working around the mine, or...He was just a youngster when he lost his eyesight.

Unidentified Speaker: How about that one over in Boulder?

LB: Then we had one over at Basin, over here, the same way. He ran the café, and done his cooking and everything and—

EN: Was blind?
LB: He lost his eyesight in a mine over there too.

Tex Baker: (Unintelligible). Used to live across the road from where the post office used to be down there. Beulah Wills (?) lives there now at Floyd Wills’ (?) old place. He had his eyes blasted out. He was scratching a blasting cap with a match. Blew his eyes out, blew his thumb. He run that TV shop down there for a long time. (Unintelligible)

US: (Unintelligible)

TB: Just across the railroad from Bonner. Marshall Peak (unintelligible).

EN: Did you take a lot of your cases when you was a warden into Butte? Or did you go to places like—

LB: Well, you had to take them to the county that they were in.

EN: How big an area did you cover?

TB: (Unintelligible)

LB: I worked from Helena... I was stationed in Butte but I worked from Jefferson County and Lewis and Clark [County] to Helena, and down to Townsend, up to the Ruby [Valley], and into the Centennial [Valley] then back down. Then Charlie Price worked the area in Madison County and down on the Big Hole River. Then I went up over from Divide up to Wisdom and to the Idaho line, and around the Pintlers, and Anaconda and back into Butte.

EN: You started being a warden in 1938?

LB: Yes.

EN: How many wardens was there back then?

LB: Nineteen.

EN: Only 19?

LB: Nineteen.

TB: Nineteen in the state?

LB: Nineteen in the state.
TB: Was old Archie (unintelligible) Fish and Game director then when you was a warden?

LB: No. He was the one that fired me.

TB: He’s the one that fired you.

LB: Yes.

EN: When you had that big area, how did you cover that? Mostly by automobile?

LB: Yes, we got 50 dollars a month to operate our outfit on. That was gas and maintenance. We couldn't go over 50 dollars a month. Then you had to furnish your own equipment. If you done any eating, you had to do that out of that 50 dollars a month.

EN: Did you get wages besides that?

LB: One hundred twenty-five dollars a month.

EN: So actually you were running on a 175 dollars a month?

LB: Well yes, but you had to pay your own expenses out of that. Then I worked a year then I got a raise up to 140. Boy, I was rich.

EN: Could you carry a gun back then like they do now?

LB: Not lawfully.

EN: Not lawfully. Did you carry one often?

LB: I never put on my pants that I didn’t put on my gun.

EN: What’d you pack, a six shooter?

LB: Yes. Working Butte there you carried a gun all the time.

EN: Did you ever have any occasions where you had to use your gun or anything?

LB: Well, a few, but they always knew that I had one and they knew enough not to monkey.

EN: What was that story, Les, you was telling in Lewistown about those two guys that were going to throw you in the creek and you beaned one of them with your pistol?

LB: That was down there at Cardwell.
EN: Had you been a warden very long at that time?

LB: No, I just started.

EN: Oh, you just started? How did that story go?

LB: They were just three big Bohunks out of Butte that was going to...they was fishing. They had over the limit of fish. One of them didn’t have a license, and I was going to take them in. They told me that I wasn’t going to take them in. They was going to throw me in the river. One of them made a football pass at me, and I rapped an old Colt .38 around right back of his head. I wanted to know if the others wanted any of it. They said that I’d kill their friend so I told them I’d do the same thing with them. So, I put him in the back end of the outfit.

EN: You had a car?

LB: Yes. I went into Whitehall and he started his moaning and groaning and I knew he was alive. So when I got into Whitehall—

[Interruption]

LB: I found out that he was okay and that. I took the one in that didn’t have no license. I didn’t have nothing on the rest of them. So, that was that.

EN: Did you have them two guys riding in the back with this guy you subdued?

LB: No, no. You don’t treat them like that, not guys from Butte. (laughs)

EN: How did you take them into town?

LB: They had their own outfit.

EN: I see. Did you have a lot of problems with the guys out of Butte more than other places?

LB: I had one bunch—gamblers and bartenders. They was ornery to deal with. Then your ACM [Anaconda Copper Mining Company] officials. They didn’t want you to interfere with them.

EN: When they’d be fishing or breaking the law?

LB: Yes.

EN: Why was that, because they were powerful or—?
LB: Up to the time I went on, they were. See this Colonel Stivers, he called me up to the office, and he says...I went in and introduced myself. He says, “We furnish the badge for the Fish and Game boys”—or wardens.

I said, "No, the State of Montana furnishes my badge."

He says, "Then you're not going to cooperate with the fifth floor?" That’s the ACM offices.

I said, “Oh yes.” I says, "You fellows all look alike. From the fellows down on Mercury Street to the fifth floor. You all look alike, and that's the way I'm going to handle it."

EN: Was this when you were first a warden?

LB: Yes.

EN: You went in and got squared away with them?

LB: Yes, after I had picked up about six of them. Then they found out I meant business. The fellow that was warden up at Libby, he said they were all always coming up there and shooting a bunch of deer and taking hindquarters and leaving the rest. So I told him, I says, “All I need is a license number of the car.”

So he called me up and give me the license number, and I went up there and seen Col. Stivers. He was in charge of the law enforcement division.

EN: For ACM?

LB: Yes. So, I talked to him. He says, “Oh, that car was down in the garage.”

I said, “Well, the license wasn’t.” I says, “Who checked the car out?” I had a stooge that worked at the garage down there, and I knew who checked the car out. So I kept on asking him about it. Finally he had to admit that these three fellows had checked the car out so I had a talk with them. They admitted that they’d been up there. So I collected a bond and sent it up to the warden up there, and he had been for three years trying to get a conviction but he couldn't do it.

EN: When you started doing stuff like that did this colonel start putting pressure on you politically or anything?

LB: They circulated petitions and everything else, but he couldn't.

EN: Couldn't do her?
LB: No. It was when Governor Ayers was in. He and I—we had a deal.

EN: What was the deal?

LB: Well, that he put me on as game warden.

EN: If you done a good job?

LB: Well that's what I wanted. I could have had any job I wanted, but that was the job I wanted.

EN: How come you wanted to be a game warden? What was your reasoning?

LB: Well, just a silly idea, I guess.

EN: Did you have a great feeling for the outdoors and right and wrong?

LB: Well, I had always worked in it...always worked promoting wildlife and stuff like that. One time I was on the board of directors for the Rocky Mountain Sportsmen. I was on the board of directors for the Butte Anglers Club at the same time. I would just make a nomination, and they were buying it.

EN: Was this while you were a warden?

LB: Yes.

EN: You were giving them some inside information?

LB: Well no, I would make information. It was really before I went on as game warden when I caused all the trouble.

TB: I bet you knew old Harry Morgan pretty well?

LB: Oh yes.

TB: Harry’s quite an old guy.

LB: Harry knew me too.

EN: Was Harry a warden too?

TB: Yes. Harry Morgan was warden for many, many years.

EN: Did you and him work together?
LB: Oh yes. I knew him before I went on as game warden.

EN: So, he was there when you started? He had already been a warden?

LB: He was in the office the day I got my oath of office. He told me, he says, “Let me tell you something, kid, you either see or you don't see. And when you see, take a good look.” That was his theory. You either see, or don't see.

EN: I was talking to Bud Moore, Les, and he was telling a story I should ask you about. Something about some fellows you were trailing and you'd caught up with them and one of them had took off to run away and you shot over his head. Up Skalkaho or someplace? What was that story about?

LB: Well, I don't remember which one I told him.

TB: (Unintelligible). Did you ever know that Johnny Stiver? He was around Missoula (unintelligible) but also Ovando (unintelligible).

LB: No, I don’t think I—

TB: They say he used to...I never...I met him when I first come to (unintelligible).

EN: You came from Idaho to Montana, you told me, that's where you started? Did you come right to Deer Lodge when you came to Montana?

LB: No, I come from Idaho and went to work for Safeway.

EN: Where was that?

LB: In Butte. I worked for them for seven years.

EN: What was your job at Safeway?

LB: Clerk.

EN: Oh, you was a clerk, checkout guy?

LB: Clerk, and then I went from Butte to Deer Lodge. I was here a year, then I went from here to Dillon. I was there for three years.

EN: What did you do in Deer Lodge and Dillon?
LB: Clerk.

EN: Same thing at Safeway?

LB: Well, I was head clerk is what they called them then. Then I wouldn't join the Mormon Church down at Dillon, so they sent me back to Butte. I told them to take their church and what they could do with that. So they sent me back to Butte and I was in Butte for six weeks, and they sent me back to Dillon to inventory the manager out down there. Then I was down there till ’32. Then I went to Missoula and I was over in Missoula. When they bought out the Haines’ stores and the Piggly Wiggly’s, I was inventorying those out.

EN: Who bought them out, Safeway?

LB: Safeway.

EN: So they were pretty strong, the Mormons in Safeway Corporation back then?

LB: It’s a Mormon corporation.

EN: Where did you go from Missoula?

LB: Back to Butte. Because they put me back as a clerk, when I went to Butte then I quit. I told them to take their store and outfit...I didn’t know that they had me scheduled to go down to Billings as a supervisor. They had to get rid of the supervisor they had down there before they could break the news to me. So the day I opened up my store in Butte, then they called me up and told me they were sorry that I didn’t hold off for a while.

EN: What, did you quit Safeway and started your own store?

LB: Yes.

EN: Is that right?

LB: I’d just get it all built up nice, and then they’d have a strike. Down it’d go, then up again. I was doing taxidermist work too.

EN: On the side?

LB: Yes. I kind of run into a taxidermist shop rather than a grocery store, making souvenirs and things like that.

EN: About what year was that? In ’30, what?
LB: [Nineteen] thirty-eight.

EN: Up until '38.

LB: Then I was making ammunition for the Rocky Mountain Sportsmen. I got enough information on Ayers that he had to do something. So I got an injunction against him to get him to get rid of the injunction, give me a job as game warden.

EN: What was the injunction about? Some political things or—?

LB: No. He had between 3,000 and 5,000 pounds of wild meat stored in a freezer there.

EN: How did he acquire that?

LB: In Butte.

TB: (Unintelligible).

LB: He had everything that was...He had sheep, and he had moose, and he had goat, and bear, and everything.

EN: How’d he acquire the meat?

LB: How’d what?

EN: How did he get ahold of that much meat?

LB: I never asked him.

EN: Oh, you never?

LB: But it was all in good shape.

TB: Probably give to him by his cronies. That’s probably where he got a lot of it.

LB: Yes, that’s...Drinking partners.

EN: Then when you became warden...about what period did you get married to Thelma? [Barton’s wife’s name is Alma.]

LB: We got married in ‘33.

EN: So she was with you when you became a warden?
LB: Yes.

EN: I see. Then you became a warden, you lived in Butte or Deer Lodge?

LB: Well, no, I was in Butte for eight years.

TB: He was warden in 1933, wasn’t you?

LB: No.

TB: No, not until ’38. I thought you was a warden earlier than that because I’d heard your name mentioned before that time period and I thought you was a warden then.

TB: I was up a Placid Lake hunting with the Adams bunch up there in ’33. That’s about the first time I got acquainted with Harry Morgan.

EN: He was the game warden of the place? How did it come about that you got acquainted with him? You just bump into him?

LB: No. He was waiting for me. He’d stopped at the camp. See, he was an Indian, and he stopped the Indian here at the camp. He told me, he says, “These Indians, they get that meat for food. You get your meat on your license. Make sure you do.”

I said that I had one. How thorough he was, the day I left, he was waiting when I hit the Placid Lake Road—I hit the main road—he was there. He made sure that I had one deer for each one of us.

EN: When did it come about that you came about to run the bird farm? What year was that you went down there?

LB: Let’s see, ’38 to...when was the war over?

TB: [Nineteen] forty-three.

LB: See, I was up to Fort Peck the summer before, and then in August...VJ Day is when I took over the game farm up here.

EN: What did VJ stand for?

LB: Victory, I guess.

EN: Oh, Victory Day. You was up at Ft. Peck, stationed up there?

Lester Barton Interview, OH 099-003, 004, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
LB: I was up there proving my theory on raising pheasants.

EN: What was that?

LB: Bringing it from about 380 BC up to the present times. That’s the way they were raising pheasants up here at the game farm. The same as they raised them in 380 B.C.

EN: Explain that. I don’t understand what you are talking about?

LB: Well, they was raising them with setting hens and...letting an old setting hen go out with a bunch of chicks, and she would raise them up. They had about six old hens in a 12 by 12 pen. Well, those old hens had these chicks in this pen, and that’s the way they’d raise them.

EN: They were using chicken hens end pheasant chicks?

LB: Yes.

EN: How did you get your theory? What was your theory?

LB: Well, my theory was that you could raise them same as turkeys with an incubator and the proper food. You could raise them artificially.

EN: How did you come about that theory?

LB: Oh, just sneaking...working on my theory with (unintelligible) from the game farm up here and keeping things on the quiet until I proved my theory. So then I tipped one of the commissioners off on it. Showed him the birds that we had, and I had a game farm. I tried to talk them out of it, but they insisted that I go ahead.

EN: How come you tried to talk them out of it?

LB: Well, I didn’t think I knew enough to raise 12,000 to 14,000 birds. I raised 25, but I couldn’t raise 12,000 to 14,000. So I went up to Ft. Peck and worked on a light deal. Raising your pheasants, we’d start them now. Well, we’d start them in October with your light and your heat. By now you was hatching chicks because your chicks or your hens will lay then and you can raise your chicks early that way.

EN: Now being February, does that mean it takes that long to incubate them from October to February?

LB: Well you get your eggs then first and put them in the incubator and hatch them up. It worked out fine for that first bunch of eggs. That year we released pheasants the first of June.
that was full grown. But when you start your regular laying season then, say April and May, and put those chicks on the ground that was what you raised your other birds on, then it don’t work out.

EN: What happens?

LB: They die.

EN: How come?

LB: They’re not immune to the disease. Your first hatch wouldn’t...Well, all your stuff is more or less immune to disease or builds up immunity to the disease. But then you start out with a new bunch of birds on that contaminated ground, it don’t work out.

EN: How’d you solve that problem?

LB: Well, we just raised one crop.

EN: One crop a year?

LB: Yes.

EN: You would start in October then you could release full grown birds in June?

LB: Well, no. We saved the light expense and the heat expense by starting them...you generally get your eggs about the first of April. Then you would get your birds going, and then you release those about the first of August.

EN: So you went from this October stuff to the April-August?

LB: Then I built all these buildings that’s down here.

EN: At Warm Springs?

LB: At Warm Springs. I built those, and then I would raise around 14,000 birds.

EN: A year? So you started out from scratch?

LB: I remodeled it. We built four houses first. Then I went and built another house. Just an experiment house out of old lumber and stuff. That’s when we built the second bunch of houses. The first bunch they didn’t work out right. So I built another bunch of houses to make them work out. They worked out.
EN: What was the matter with the first bunch?

LB: Too hot.

EN: They were too hot? The chicks, they had problems?

LB: Yes. Then they created dampness too. They were insulated and, well, they had quite a few problems. We thought we should have an insulated house and instead—

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
EN: Was there anything there when you got that thing started in the first place, or did you just pick that spot?

LB: Say what?

EN: Was there any buildings or any Fish and Game involvement there before you started?

LB: Oh yes, it was operated for 15 or 20 years.

EN: So, that was one of the original pheasant farm-type places?

LB: Yes. I think it was operated, we’ll say, 15 years before—

EN: So that would put it in what year about, 1920?

LB: No, they built that game farm, I’d say, about ’27 because I was in Butte when they built it.

EN: I see. Once you got that thing rolling, how did you come up with the right types of feed and stuff because—

LB: I worked with Missoula on that. The Missoula feed outfit over there, I worked with them.

EN: Coming up with a formula?

LB: When I first started, you had to watch your birds so they didn’t get chilled or anything like that. I went and give them an overdose of vitamin E—my laying hens. You’re supposed to get one egg every other day. That’s when a pheasant normally lays their eggs—every other day. I was getting two eggs in 24 hours.

EN: Were they good eggs?

TB: (Unintelligible)

LB: Your chicks were as weak and your eggs was soft shelled. It didn’t work out. I imagine that I had 40,000 eggs down there and I could only set about half of them. Then those chicks they had pleurosis [pleurisy] and stuff like that.

EN: They had, what was that?

LB: Weak joints and that pleurosis.
EN: Oh, “crooked legs” they called it?

LB: Yes, and crooked necks and legs. We had what we called a battery system. We would put the new hatch birds in a room in tiers. We would put 100 birds in a tier. I had three women that stayed in there all the time with disinfected clothes. They had to change their clothes before they went in there. Then all they done was taught the birds to eat and drink. Generally when they’d bring the birds out—when I’d take a bunch of birds down there—then they’d take them out of the box, dip their beak in water and dip it in the feed and then put it in this battery. Well, by keeping those birds close—the battery was about the size of a table top—keeping those birds in the closed area they got a growth of...We’d keep them in there for ten days, and they would be the same as three weeks out in the brooder house.

EN: So, you had 100 chicks in an area about like this table, four by four?

LB: Yes. Then every eight to ten days. It all depended on how we needed...Then we’d take those out and put them under the covers out in the brooder house.

EN: How long did you leave them in there?

LB: Then those would stay in that pen until they were ready to turn out. I got my idea on that from the ACM, the way they raised sheep. They build them up, up here at the ranch, then they built a sheep shed. All your pens had just one water spigot, but they had a bucket in between, so that the water would come in the corners. That’s the way my houses was. The water would come in the corner. Anyway, then I figured if they could keep their sheep in there for ten days and get four to six week-growth on them I could do the same thing with birds. It worked out.

EN: How long did you work on the pheasant farm?

LB: Up here? Six years.

EN: You was there from about what year to what year?

LB: Come down here in ’51, I guess it was.

EN: So six years previous to ‘51, you’d been there?

LB: Yes.

EN: What happened then? Why did you quit there?

LB: Well, they had a graduate out of Missoula. He specialized in pheasant raising, and he got all his knowledge out of a book. Judge Green over in Missoula had to find a place for him, and I wanted to get back as game warden. Things was getting too complicated. Biologists was...
starting in, and they were beginning to show up there and trying to tell me how to raise pheasants when they didn't know which end of the egg you set in the incubator or anything like that. They had all kinds of theories. So I come back as game warden.

EN: Did you move to Deer Lodge then to become a game warden?

LB: Yes.

EM Then how long was you a game warden for?

LB: I was here four years before I picked up...Well, I didn't pick them up. I just went to them and told them that if they didn't straighten out that it would be embarrassing to the bunch of us because we all belonged to the Masonic Lodge. They couldn't see...They took it that I called them poachers.

EN: These was some local citizens?

LB: They went over to Archie O'Claire and he didn't like me anyway. So that was a good chance to get rid of me. Even the score between him and I.

EM What was the problem between you and Archie?

LB: Well, the first he was in charge of the Pittman-Robertson beaver trapping.

EN: Explain that, I don't understand it.

LB: Well, when they put the Pittman-Robertson in effect then there was beaver trappers and there was big game biologists and there was fish biologists and everybody had a whole group that, boy, that money was to be spent.

EN: I see.

LB: Then Doc McFarland sends Archie down on the Missouri River trip to train a bunch of fellows to trap beaver. They was down there two weeks, and a fellow from Kalispell he came into the office one day and he said he quit. Doc McFarland and he was very good friends so he says, “No, you're not quitting.”

He told him, he says, “We can't catch any beaver, and we're not learning anything.”

EN: Doc—was he a supervisor or something?

LB: He was the director...he was state game warden at that time. That was his title.
EN: He was the top guy then?

LB: Yes. Anyway he called up from Butte, and he says, “If I send a fellow over, will you show him how to catch beaver?”

I told him sure. So here he come. He had 18 traps, and he had two plywood cages—four by four cages with floor in them. It was all deals that you could pin up. When he unloaded that deal, I told him, I says, “You know, these beaver over here they just love to chew on wood.” I said, “We’ll have to get some different cages.” So I rustled up a bunch of cages. First we went out and set a bunch traps.

EN: These were live traps?

LB: Yes. I had a place where there was a lot of beaver, so I took they live traps and we set them. WE set 18 traps and caught 16 beaver the first night. Well, this character was a good friend of a paper [newspaper] guy—

EN: Who? This guy you was teaching?

LB: Yes.

EN: What was his name? Cussack (?)?

LB: Yes. He was a good friend of the paper in Butte. So here come the photographers and everything. Took a big picture and the front page was all beaver.

EN: Les Barton Teaches Guy How to Catch Beaver, eh?

LB: Yes.

EN: How did that go over with...what was this fellow’s name that you’re—

LB: Archie O’Claire. He blew up. So Cussack and...oh, then there was a fellow by the name of...Oh, what was that warden up at Augusta (unintelligible) so long?

TB: (Unintelligible)?

LB: No, no. It was—

TB: Oh, I know who you mean now.

LB: Hill? It wasn’t Hill, but it was...
TB: (Unintelligible) game warden over there.

LB: (Unintelligible) old character. Bruce Neal (?).

TB: Bruce Neal? Oh yes, Dan’s dad. Dan Neal’s dad. Bruce Neal, for sure I remember him.

LB: Yes. It was Dan that they sent over to learn how to trap too.

TB: (Unintelligible) teach him a whole lot.

LB: We got everything going. Then I...in the meantime, McFarland sent me up to Fort Peck, and I was kind of their fair-haired boy.

EN: You were the director’s fair-haired boy?

LB: Yes. So, then I went to the game farm. When I was down there three years, when Archie went back in as director over there or as state game warden.

EN: How did he get that position?

LB: Well, he was "brown nosing".

EN: With the governor?

LB: Anyway, He got in over there as state game warden. Well, right away he was going to get me fired. The commission opted to fire him if he didn’t lay off of me. So he resigned. He went back up to Kalispell. Then when...what the devil, I guess it was...No, it’d have to be the “galloping Swede" [Governor John Hugo Aronson]. When he got in—

EN: As governor.

LB: —then he appointed Archie as the director. I knew good and well then that I was gone.

EN: Did Archie, was it the governor that he brown nosed to get back and forth out of that position?

LB: I don’t know.

EN: Oh, you don’t know.

LB: Anyway he got back in.

EN: Then that was it? He took out his revenge out on you?
LB: When he got back, the morning I seen he was back in, I told Alma, I says, "I'll be fired as soon as Archie gets his feet on the floor." So I was. Then he worked on this bunch here. They went over and told him that I told them they were poachers, and that's just what he wanted. He got the commission to recommend that they fire me, and demote Clyde Howard over it because he didn't have me straightened out.

EN: What year was that in?

LB: That must have been '55, I guess.

EN: Fifty five. So you worked from '38 to '55 for them?

LB: I put in 17 years.

EN: Quite a reward. Get canned over a deal like that.

LB: Well, they canned me for raising wild geese without a permit.

EN: What was you raising geese for?

LB: I was.

EN: Up at the bird farm?

LB: Yes. That was what they finally come up with. They had to find something to can me for. So they went back, and they found that I was raising geese without a permit—state permit for raising migratory water fowl.

EN: This was while you was in charge of the bird farm?

LB: No, it was after, but I still was working on the geese, I had the geese out up at Alkali Lake up at Helmville, but they didn't know it. That was another thorn. They couldn't find where I had my geese out. I had about that much clipped out of each wing, cut so that the feathers wouldn't grow. You could see them in flight then. They went south for four years then returned. The last one returned four years after I planted them.

EN: Where were you at when you raised the geese?

LB: I started at Warm Springs, but I was working on the theory that if you raise your geese and take them out and plant them like you do pheasants that you can put geese in anywhere. You can.
EN: They’ll come back.

LB: They’ll come back if you work it right.

EN: How did they find out about that? That you had done that?

LB: Well, Ford over at Missoula—

EN: Jim Ford?

LB: Yes. I needed somebody to help me on the deal, so, I thought he was a pretty good guy. So I tipped my hand to him, and he run right into Archie—

EN: Squeaked on you?

LB: —squeaked.

EN: How do you feel all about that now?

LB: Well, that was the best thing they ever done was when they canned me.

EN: How come?

LB: Well, I’d still be going on, more than likely fighting the elements and thinking the Fish and Game was tops.

EN: How do you feel about it now?

TB: (Unintelligible)

LB: (laughs) That’s an awful question to ask me.

EN: You don’t want to talk like that on tape.

LB: I’d hate to be director because I’d sure clean out the whole works!

TB: (Unintelligible)

LB: I’d have seven biologists, I might have eight. One in the office to get the mail, and other seven—one in each district—setting on the high peak.

EN: With a set of binoculars.
EN: When you was a warden, did you have a lot of trouble with trappers or bird hunters or fishermen? Which one was the hardest one to work with? To catch?

LB: I wouldn't say there's any difference.

EN: There wasn't any difference?

LB: You had more trouble with your sore heads and your sportsmen's clubs.

EN: The big shots?

LB: Yes.

EN: They got a little riled when you caught them?

LB: Well, they wasn't so mad when you caught them. They was always checking up that you was doing this and doing that wrong. There was always a problem with those characters.

EN: Did you trap while you was a warden?

LB: Yes, all the time for the state. I didn't trap for myself.

EN: What did you do after you was a warden...let's see, you said that was in '55 or '58?

LB: Fifty-five.

EN: Fifty-five. What did you do then?

LB: I went trapping.

EN: You went trapping fulltime?

LB: I was a deputy sheriff down here until I got my 20 years in. I was a deputy sheriff down here for three years. I was sexton of the cemetery out here for three years.

EN: A what at the cemetery?

LB: I run the cemetery.

EN: Oh, the boss.
LB: Then I trapped on the side. When I got my 20 years in down here at the sheriff office, then I went to work for the prison down here, and I worked there for ten years.

EN: How’d you like working at the prison?

LB: Oh, it was good. I’d rather work law enforcement than I would watch those knot-heads.

EN: That’s what I was saying, you’ve been involved in law enforcement in one type or another for a long time.

LB: Thirty years and one month.

EN: Involved one way or the other.

LB: Yes.

EN: When you was a young guy did you, was that kind of the way you wanted to live your life?

LB: Oh, I always worked law enforcement, even when I was in high school.

EN: Oh, what did you do then?

LB: I worked dances and stuff like that for the sheriff. When I was about 17, 18, I’d work Saturday night dances and stuff like that.

EN: What town was that in?

LB: Over in Salmon.

EN: Salmon, Idaho?

LB: Yes. I was kind of always more (unintelligible). It’s kind of a disease. It gets to you in your blood. I always enjoyed it.

EN: Working like that?

LB: Yes. I was only down here at the prison 16 days when they had that last riot—the big riot when they shot Rothe.

EN: Who was Rothe?

LB: He was a deputy warden down there. It was the gun I was packing, and I was packing the only gun inside the wall. I’d just come home for noon...or for my shift. They change shifts at two o’clock, and I’d just come home and got a telephone call from Butte.
EN: Was this two o’clock in the morning or two in the afternoon?

LB: In the afternoon. They that knew I was on the catwalk coming inside the prison, and they didn’t know who was shot but they knew that somebody was shot. So they called from Butte and told them that it was okay when I left down there. I’d just gone in the door. About 15 minutes later, gets a telephone call from Pittsburgh that friends back there in the Carnegie Museum knew I was working in the prison and on the catwalk and they wanted to know if I’d got shot. We told them no, that there’s nothing going on down there. They’d gotten it on the news that somebody was shot. So I told Alma, “We better go down and checkup.” So we went down, and sure enough Rothe had been shot. Everything was in an uproar. So then I went back, went to work for 56 hours without leaving there.

EN: What started all that riot down there?

LB: Just your knot-heads in there. You could tell that there was something brewing just by the way the folks was all acting.

EN: You’d only been there 16 days when this started?

LB: Yes. In at the time, there was about eight guys that was down here to jail that the court had sent up there. There was one of them that always kept me pretty well posted on what was going on. He always told me, he says, “Don’t you ever give that gun up.” That’s the way he come to me, he said, “Don’t you ever give that gun up.”

EN: These eight guys were inmates at the jail, and they let them work at the prison?

LB: No, they were sent up there for life. This one that kept always telling me that and he was in there, supposed to be, for life. He kept telling me, he says, “Don’t ever let anybody get that gun away from you, because when they do I’ll get it and use it on you.” He didn’t mean nothing by it, but he just telling me, tried to tell me something.

So this fellow that relieved me, he went up on the catwalk and the janitor that I had on the catwalk that was my janitor, he come up with a bread knife and told the fellow to give him the gun and the guy did. So then they took me off the catwalk and they put me down with these guys, down in the black box or in isolation where they had them all. There was 22 of them that was ringleaders of the riot. They had them down there. I was in with them. They were all locked up, but I was getting them water and stuff like that—kind of their swamper. I asked this guy, I says, “How come you didn’t come up and get the gun when I was up there?”

He says, “Well, Barton, you know, some will and some won’t.” That was his answer.
(Unintelligible)
EN: They had this other fellow that took over your shift figured?

LB: They had him figured that he wouldn’t fight back.

EN: How did the deputy warden get shot?

LB: When they got the gun, then they put it in a carton, and the leather was a means of finances in there. They were working leather back and forth, and they had these rolls of leather, and paper cartons and stuff like that. They put this gun in that and took it up to the office to tell him that there was a riot on. The fellow that shot him, he told me, “That gun went off. I didn’t mean to kill him.” But he says, “I was excited and nervous,” and he says, “I put my finger on the trigger and that gun went off.”

EN: What happened to that guy for that, for shooting the deputy warden?

LB: Well, he got life, but in 13 years he was out. In fact, they sent him to another prison because there was fellows that thought he’d done wrong and made them suffer for it so they sent him...think he went to California or some place in another prison.

EN: And in 13 years after he shot the deputy warden he was out of prison?

LB: Yes, 13 years is a life sentence.

EN: How did you feel about working around them kind of guys that were in there for life and stuff? Did you feel sorry for them?

LB: No. When I had a fencing crew, I had that for a couple years, I insisted on lifers and crazies.

EN: People with mental disorder?

LB: Yes. That’s all I had on my crew and we were out fencing. They had plenty of axes and everything to work with. I insisted they send me lifers or crazies. Lifers kept the crazies under control, and I never had a...I had—

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
[Tape 2, Side A]

LB: —hundred and fifteen, twenty at a time.

EN: And you had this 100-foot-long cage full of these 100 rabbits?

LB: Yes. Then we’d put two or three rabbits in a cage or one of the traps and you’d head back for (unintelligible).

EN: With the bundle of fur that he’d bought up and the rabbits too?

LB: Yes.

EN: Did he pay you for catching the rabbits?

LB: No. I done that just to get away from the game corps (?) more than anything. Because there’s nothing to do around there when birds wasn’t...You’d fix up your stuff in the fall to get it all ready for the spring, and then you didn’t have nothing to do.

EN: Have you always sold to just a few buyers? Have you sold a lot of fur buyers over your time?

LB: I’ve sold all over the country. I sold one bunch beaver that went to Italy that the fellow couldn’t speak English. He had to have an interpreter. I sold two bunches to France, where they couldn’t talk much English.

EN: These were your own private bunch of beaver?

LB: Yes, these were exporters. Yes, I sold 1,100, 1,200 dollars worth of beaver at the time.

EN: This new trap you came up with, this muskrat trap, was that your own idea?

LB: No. That’s a Hawkman (?)

EN: Oh, a Hawkman’s trap?

LB: Yes.

EN: And you’re just improving on it?

LB: Well, I wouldn’t say I improved any because I...with that fancy wing deal I made three of them, and I haven’t caught a rabbit in one of them yet.
EN: Oh, you haven’t?

LB: No, the others is a much better trap. Of course maybe I didn’t have them in the right spot or something.

EN: You using snares in your trapping?

LB: I use snares for coyotes.

EN: How’d you learn to use those, or how did you go about learning how to use snares?

LB: This fellow from, oh, down the other side of Roundup, his sister lives across the street here and he was up—

EN: Bakerson (?)?

LB: No, this is before he started making snares. He’d come on up—his name was Gerts (?)—and he told me, “You know, this fellow down in Roundup catches 200 or 300 coyotes a year with snares.” He says, “You ought to get a hold of him and get him to give you some dope on it.”

So I wrote Gregerson (?) and he wrote back. He says he’d be glad to make me up a couple dozen. So I sent him the money for them, and he sent them up and a whole list of what would be a good idea how to set them. He had 55 customers that was using his snares, or that he’d made snares for 55 different trappers. So I started using them, I had good luck with them. So then I got a hold of this Hawkman up in Canada with the same kind of a snare but half the price. I’ve been using Hawkman snares ever since.

EN: So you’ve only been using snares about ten years then?

LB: Yes.

EN: How do you like them?

LB: Well, in the snowy country in the right areas, they work a lot better than traps. They sure didn’t work this year with the open weather, and your coyotes never did come down out of the timber.

EN: What do you think about this winter and the weather? Have you ever seen one like this before?

LB: Not in Montana.

EN: Not in Montana?
LB: Idaho either. Something different. There’s a volcano done it, I think.

EN: Mount Saint Helen’s you think?

LB: That’s my idea.

TB: Do you use those snares, the Gregerson (?) necks down there?

LB: Yes.

TB: Do you like the Hawkman snare better than his?

LB: They’re the same thing, only half the price.

EN: Gregerson got his idea from Hawkman. He told me that.

TB: Well that’s a good snare, but that of course—

LB: That’s what I always accused him that—

TB: He stole that lock idea right out from the other guy. That’s what he done.

LB: Yes, he stole the idea from Hawkman. This old Bill Hawkman, I—

TB: Well, I’ve got some at home, and I can’t see any difference from one or the other as far as operation.

LB: What I like about Hawkman’s cable it’s a little firmer than what his, because it’s a two wrap—one wraps one way and one the other with your coyotes’ snares. And his, Gregerson’s, only is airplane cable, and a coyote will chew one of them in two.

EN: You’ve used snares for quite awhile haven’t you Tex?

TB: I’ve been using snares since I first heard of Rayland Thompson (?).

EN: That’s back in the ‘40s, wasn’t it?

TB: Earlier than that. In the early ‘30s I was out catching coyotes right up there around Placer Creek.

EN: With snares?
TB: With snares, but you know I made them myself. You know what I made them out of? Good bailing wire. Of course, bailing wire used to be about a third (unintelligible) than it is nowadays. That old bailing wire they made years ago made a hell of a good trap snare if you used a spring pole or a log crossing on a creek, why, they fell off. Now, I caught a coyote the other day, and I made a bum deal on him because he went all the way through it and got caught right around here. Went over my hanging pole—

EN: Cutting down around the rear legs?

TB: Right, just (unintelligible) the rear legs. When he turned to flip-flop, when he went over the pole and he wore the hair plumb off just the head of his tail about there just where he would back and forth on that pole there. He was dead, of course, when I got to him. But place getting caught around the neck, I caught him, and that’s very unheard for me to catch them only around the neck. I caught lots of coyotes with a piece of bailing wire snare, just bailing wire. You find a creek some place where I really learned to catch coyotes with bailing wire snare. A big log that fell across a creek in the timber country was usually a bunch of alders or something that would start growing up on a creek bank side that log. (Unintelligible) tie your snare there. Set your snare out here so your coyote goes through it crossing these logs. Find a creek that don’t freeze. That’s what I did. Find one that stays pretty open in fair weather, cats and coyotes have always crossed on. You swap it out and (unintelligible) so that they had (unintelligible). Course sometimes you have to nail something on the side of a log, something to kind of guide your snares. Lots of times I used black thread, just a spool of black sewing thread, and just tied that to the snare. Bring that around a pole or something or just wrap it around a few times. Of course it’s so light that when they hit it, they’d break that thread. About one on each side holding the snare, but the darn wind would get them out of shape. That’s where the wind will hit them.

LB: Yes, I find about (unintelligible) snares. They don’t get—

TB: All you have to do with them is get them stapled enough so the wind won’t get them out of place, then you’re all right.

EN: Did you ever use Conibears much, Les?

LB: Oh, quite a little bit.

TB: I caught lots of coyotes before I ever had a snare that was made out of cable with just a piece of bailing wire. You’ll hang a coyote, and they won’t ever break it.

LB: I’ve caught fox with bailing wire, but I was lucky enough that they weren’t fast enough for something for a coyote.
TB: Well, you make a loop on them for coyotes, just like you’d make a loop in a...make it loose enough so it’ll come down tight right before it starts any strain on them. Just take a pair of plyers and put that loop in there.

LB: I always made mine just like a...When I first started there was that old style bailing wire that had a loop pull and you run the wire through.

TB: The old hand-tied wires.

LB: Yes, old hand-tied wire. I caught fox that way and cats, but--

TB: They say they work on coyotes too.

LB: It seemed they’d always get through mine. Then when I wrote Case, and he was all anxious about selling me some. Then the first thing I had a problem with the coyotes killed a calf out in the middle of the field. I wrote to him and asked him” How do you catch coyotes out in the middle of the field when there’s...” I says, “You’re such a good snare trapper, then how do you explain that?”

He wrote back and says, “Move the calf.

EN: How do the snares and the Conibear and the leg-hold traps, what do you think about that? You think that the equipment, they’re getting smarter and more techniques, or how do you feel about that? Do you think the trapper’s equipment is better than it used to be?

LB: Oh, I don’t know. I’ll tell you the Conibears is a lot better for your water animals, because there’s places where you can put a Conibear where you couldn’t put a leg-hold trap.

EN: Right.

LB: I’ll stick to a spring trap anytime rather than a Conibear or beaver trap. I can catch two beavers to one in a Conibear.

EN: How do you feel about your role as a trapper in wildlife management? Do you think you’re playing an active role?

LB: What?

EN: How do you feel about your role in wildlife management as a trapper? Why are you out there trapping?

LB: Because it cured my arthritis. (laughs)
TB: Probably for the same thing that all the rest of the trappers go out there for, because it’s something you start doing, you never quit as long as it’s there to get.

LB: That’s right. Then if I wouldn’t be trapping, I think I’d be in a wheelchair.

TB: I think I’d be the same thing.

LB: Because you are determined to go look at the trap, and no matter how much it hurts you’re going to get there. If you wasn’t trapping or had something like that, you’d sit there and your legs start swelling and they start hurting and you won’t get out of the chair. First thing you know you can’t get out of the chair.

EN: How old are you now, Les?

LB: Almost 75.

EN: Seventy-five now? So you’ve been trapping for how many years?

LB: Since I was 12.

EN: Since you were 12, so that’s—

TB: You’re 75 now Les?

LB: I’ll be 75 April.

TB: I’ll be 75 next month, the 19th. The 19th of March.

LB: I’ll be 75 the 23rd of April.

EN: So you guys were pupped the same spring then, eh?

LB: Yes. The devil was peddling kids about the same time. (laughs)

EN: Do you feel, Les, that maybe I didn’t put it well enough. What I was asking you was how do you feel about animals when you’re trapping and stuff? Keeping the, See, in transplanting beaver, you got to take some beaver out because there’s too many. Do you feel good about that kind of work?

LB: Well, I’m all in favor of trapping, or live trapping and transplanting—everything from your prairie dogs to your moose.
EN: When you have to harvest them, when you have to take them because there’s no other method, do you feel good about trapping animals?

LB: Well, the permit system is the only way to take so many out. I feel that a person should, instead of killing that stuff, live trap it. You can live trap everything, if you just got some smarts.

EN: When you do have to kill it though; do you feel good...Like the beaver, when you pelt a beaver that the pelt goes to be made into a coat instead of...It’s being use for something rather than out there dying of tularemia.

LB: If you let it get overpopulated, you’re going to come up with disease and risk annihilating the whole thing. So you’ve got to keep your stuff in balance.

EN: Yes, these people...You know, the reason why I was asking is a lot of people that someday might listen to this tape, you know, they’d say, These trappers, you know all they were interested in was making a buck. I think that what we do goes a little deeper than that.

LB: I’d say I’ve live trapped a third as many beaver as I’ve pelted. I’d say I’ve live trapped maybe 2,000 beavers.

EN: Over the years?

LB: Over the years and same thing with all the rest of your stuff. When you trap goats and sheep and stuff like that. Every one of these...if you want to get me on the fight is when the Fish and Game opens the permits for so many deer or so many elk when they could be transplanted and put on their game-less game ranges.

EN: You think that the department, when you was on the game (unintelligible), the new biologists—the new era, the college-trained biologists—started coming into the field. Was a lot of the wardens pretty upset over that, because here they’d put their whole life in learning by trial and error, and a book-learned person just thought he knew it all? Was there a lot of friction there?

LB: They retired just about as fast as they could. (laughs)

EN: Is that right? The wardens did?

LB: Yes.

EN: They just gave her up?

LB: They didn’t know nothing. They was just a dummy.

Lester Barton Interview, OH 099-003, 004, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
TB: Those goddamn biologists, I’ll tell you. I’ve had to show a few of them how to catch a beaver, when they wanted to get some for an experiment because they didn’t know enough to do it.

LB: I’ve never seen a biologist yet that...all they knew was the book. I took one up here one day in the deer winter range, where they live in the junipers. He told me, “My gosh! There must be an awful bunch of deer, look at...It’s so overgrazed.”

I told him, “It’s taken 50 years for it to be overgrazed like that.”

He says, “What makes you think so?”

I says, “Well, the new growth that comes out every year, that’s what carries the deer all the winter.” I says, “They just go back as far as what...When they start starving to death that’s when they go get into the old stuff. As long as that new growth’s out there, that’s what carries the deer through the winter.” I said, “There hasn’t been any deer in here for five years. Just look how the growth’s out there.”

He learned something that wasn’t in the book. That’s my theory of it. You can take those (unintelligible) pellets, and you can take a bunch of elk just anywhere you want them. Nibswab (?) and Dwight Howard and I took a bunch of elk over in the Bitterroot about 11 miles. We got started on them, and we found out that you could, so we took them about 11 miles.

EN: How did you do that?

LB: With pellets.

EN: Did you find the elk?

LB: Yes, well, we didn’t have to. After a week, they found us.

EN: By the pellet trail?

LB: All you had to do was go out there and honk your horn and here the elk would come. They learn fast when they’re hungry. Each day we’d drone down another quarter of a mile or so. After they got wise that we had the feed truck, then here they’d come.

EN: Was this in the winter?

LB: Yes in the wintertime. Done the same thing with ducks. I tracked ducks one winter and banded them here at the springs. All I had to do was take the truck, go out to where the ducks was staying in the slough, and honk the horn and here they’d come. I had my (unintelligible) straps there. They were about twice as long as this and three foot high.

Lester Barton Interview, OH 099-003, 004, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
EN: So they’re about eight feet long and three foot high?

LB: I used chicken wire about three foot high and made funnels in there so that they’d have to come in there a ways. Then I’d put my feet inside there, and we’d catch 400 or 500 ducks in about three traps there.

EN: This was while you were in employed in the Game Department up there. What year was this, in the ‘30s or ‘40s?

LB: It was in the ‘40s there. Then band them and turn them loose.

EN: So you trapped everything from mink to moose pretty near?

LB: I trapped everything.

EN: Did you ever trap any bear?

LB: Yes, both ways. Trapped them in the regular traps and live traps.

EN: Was that for the department? That you trapped bears for?

LB: Well, some, yes. Most of them. I trapped a few that wasn’t for the department, and some for the sheep men and stuff like that.

EN: That old bear trap that you have, that keg with the nails in it? That’s quite a thing. That’s raised a lot of discussion. How’d you come about getting that?

LB: I found that up Warm Spring Creek or on the ridge between Warm Spring Creek and Gallagher.

EN: What were you doing up there?

LB: I was working game warden work then. Found that in about ‘39 or so, or ‘40. No, about ‘39, I think it was. Snooping around, found it up there in the brush.

EN: Had it had a bear in it?

LB: No. It had an old skull in it.

EN: From the bear?

LB: Yes.
EN: I’ll be danged.

LB: The rancher that used that bear trap, as near as I can find out, lived about four miles from where I found it. But the bear broke the chain and got away. I never did find the trapper or the bear, either one. All I’d come by was some of his kin folks that knew that he had made the trap and heard him tell the story about losing the bear with...He raised pigs up Warm Spring Creek up there.

EN: This half a keg had a chain on it?

LB: What?

EN: You’re saying that the bear broke the chain?

LB: Yes he had a chain in the bunghole of the keg there, and the chain broke.

EN: The bear made off with the keg on his head.

LB: Yes, so he wandered around there until he starved to death when he got about four miles up the creek.

EN: Once he stuffed his head in that keg, and he couldn’t pull it out because of those nails angles in there? The ways the nails were angled in?

LB: Yes, so he died an awful death. You talk about leg-hole traps being cruel.

EN: That’s much crueler, isn’t it? How was a bear in a leg-hole trap? Did you catch some that way?

LB: These traps that I got have teeth in them, and they don’t even break the bones. The first bear traps that Newhouse made, they didn’t put teeth in them. They’d hit so hard that they’d break the leg and then the bear would twist off. So then they put these teeth in them that when they go into the meat, it slows the action. Most time you never break the bone even.

TB: Those teeth in them are all off set anyway, aren’t they?

LB: Yes, they’re off set too.

TB: [unintelligible]

LB: The best I’ve done I got five bear in four traps in one night.
TB: Holy cow!

EN: How'd you catch five in four traps?

LB: I heard or seen them. The bear would come down and get in the trap. So we went out and took the bear out of the trap and set the trap back. The next morning I went up, and I had a pen built there and a trap in each corner. The next morning every one of them was gone. Each one of them had a bear in it. So I always said I caught five bears in four traps in one night.

EN: These were black bears?

LB: Yes, black and browns.

EN: They were overhauling the guy’s sheep?

LB: There were six of them and they killed 98 head of sheep where Edward’s over on Rock Creek.

I’ve trapped just about everything. The last year I was game warden here, I had a display down here at the fair. I caught all kinds of mice and stuff like that and then built them round wheels and things like that. Really quite an exhibit. I had more people at that than they had at their other exhibits because of watching the mice. If you want a good performer, you want to get some of these old wood rats. Boy, they were just making an old wheel—

TB: [unintelligible] spinning that thing so fast you couldn’t…it’s just a blur. They run like a devil, you know?

LB: Yes, and then these golden-mantled ground squirrels. They’re good ones too.

EN: How about your grandson feel about trapping? Is he a pretty good trapper?

LB: He says it’s the only way to make any money. I got some pictures on the camera now that, what he caught Christmas week. He caught two beaver, and he caught two coyotes, and he caught two mink, and 17 muskrats. He started out when he was four years old the first trip trapping, dealing. Now he’s only 13. He’s done pretty good. He’s caught around 200 dollars worth Christmas vacation.

EN: That’s pretty good for a kid, isn’t it, to be a trapper?

LB: At that age, yes. All I’d done was I just chauffeured him around, he did the trap setting. I done the chauffeuring. I had one coyote and three beaver, I guess. Then seven muskrats. He done the rest of the trapping. I just done the chauffeuring.
Diann Weisner: This concludes our second visit with Lester Barton, a long-time resident and trapper in the Deer Lodge Valley. Today is February 14, 1981, and this is the second of two tapes made during this visit.

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
Partial interview with Tex Baker. Sounds as if the recording took place in the car, maybe right after the interview with Lester Barton.

TB: Well then, every once in a while, Elmer’d show up, and he’d pick up a few coyotes. Well of course, he never found half of them because half of them were buried in the snow. It was a pretty tough winter. Then when spring come I thought, Well geez, he’ll surely come back to pick up that doggone stuff. Right up on the upper end of our place on a big meadow there was three or four of those 1080 (unintelligible). Part of a horse, hind leg. Front and legs are—

DW: Oh, one big piece?

TB: Yes, oh, a hindquarter. There was birds laying everyplace. Any kind of bird you wanted to name you could find laying around. Well then in the spring I didn’t see it until after snow had pretty well gone, and the bears started to come out. Then I started finding dead bear. I found two or three cubs that was dead. More coyotes, more birds. Well, after everything was just about picked bare, everything was gone, Elmer’d come out and pick up the scraps of what was left.

So the next year, when he wanted to come back and put out some more, I says, “Nothing doing. Don’t put any of that stuff on my place. Or anywhere’s near it.”

DW: How large area were you walking and seeing these dead animals?

TB: Most of it was put out on Section 19, which was a 640-acre area. Then there was some put out on another piece of ground that was 160 acres— an old homestead we had laid next to it. I think that’s about the extent of the area that he had [unintelligible] on up there. But he had several (unintelligible) out on that Section 19 there. If that’s the way it was all looked after, now—

DW: What was he...I’m sorry, what was he putting it out for?

TB: For coyotes, that was the—

DW: Were there a lot of sheep in the country?

TB: No, there was no sheep at all. None whatever. There wasn’t a sheep within 40 miles of there. I don’t know who was behind it all, but like I say he was a state trapper is what he was.

DW: State of Montana? Or was he a federal?
TB: State of Montana is what he was. I don’t think he was a federal. He was just a State of Montana trapper. The county called him a government trapper, but he was a state trapper is what he was since he was working for the state. He’s the guy that trapped the only wolf that I’ve ever seen, that I know of in this country. Of course, this was way back. That was before we had our ranch up there that he done that. Because I think I was working for the Forest Service at that time. He trapped one up there on a (unintelligible). Up there off to the left from where we come over you know, [unintelligible]. The day he got it, I was up that way and run into him up there. He’d just got the thing tied across...had an old Model A Ford. In fact, I got a picture of it over there. It’s just a small...about a sixty pound gray wolf is what it was—regular old prairie wolf.

DW: So you never used 1080 yourself on anything?

TB: No, I wouldn’t put out poison. The only thing I ever put out poison for in my life was these grubby ground squirrels. I had to put out some poison oats for them a couple seasons, but I was very careful how I used it.

DW: They say they’re getting real bad again.

TB: Well, they are.

DW: In fact, they’re using 1080 in some of the counties for them.

TB: They’ve been okayed to use that this year now.

EN: You know why they’re using 1080?

DW: No.

EN: Craig told me because ever other kind of poison like strychnine or any of that other, it damn burns squirrels to taste it and they won’t eat it. But 1080 is tasteless. They can’t taste it. He said they’ve proven in a study that they’re a more intelligent rodent than like a pocket gopher or them other gophers they got over there, you know, around Lewistown and stuff? That these Columbians are a smarter gopher.

DW: That’s Craig’s department, (unintelligible) I’ve been thinking about asking him about it.

TB: I read an article here just a while back that was telling about that it’d been okayed for I don’t...forget how many counties now, but a bunch of them.

DW: Here in Montana? Yes.
TB: Oh yes, a lot of them. They tell about all of the restriction’s going to be on how it’s handled. Put out by people that’s supposed to be educated in putting out and all this malarkey. They even went so far as to say if they’re going to pick up these poisoned carcasses so that the predators wouldn’t get them. Well that’s a bunch of malarkey because the predators will get half of them before they ever find them. That’s what’ll happen.

EN: And other gophers will drag the dead gophers down the hole and eat them.

TB: Sure, they do this. They do this. They drag them down the holes.

EN: And eat them.

DW: Why are we having an overpopulation of ground squirrels?

TB: Look what they’re going to do to the owls and hawks. Boy, don’t think they won’t be there looking for them in a hurry.

EN: Yes, they’ll slick them up too. Well, Craig claims that by using oats that the gopher only gets about 1080. What happens is he eats the 1080 and it makes him [unintelligible] or some dadburn thing. I don’t know. Anyways, he claims that a gopher can’t eat enough oats to kill an owl. But if an owl eats enough gophers, that’s how he gets killed. I don’t know how to explain it.

DW: But they’re doing it.

TB: Well he’s going to eat his fill on poisoned gophers when he finds them, you bet your foot on that. And it’ll kill him too.

EN: I think the biggest reason why they can’t control their damn gophers is there ain’t no way to, you know?

DW: I heard that gophers invade ground that’s been overgrazed.

EN: No. Hell, they get right in a wheat field.

TB: Well, they’re everyplace. One reason they’ll never control the gophers here because you go out here in the woods anyplace...You can go up to some river, take off and go clear to the top of the Mission Mountains, and you can see gophers all the time. Gophers everyplace. They’re out here in the woods where nobody knows they’re there, see, only just a few people. Nobody gives a darn for them out there. They cause no distraction over there. They’ll never get rid of the Columbia ground squirrel for the simple reason they got thousands and thousands of acres here that they can play on by the millions and nobody gives a dang. Nobody bothers them there. Once in a while somebody shoots a few of them there, maybe, along the road.
EN: Just like chipmunks and squirrels. You’re never going to kill them.

DW: Do they thrive as well on irrigated pastures as they do on just dry land?

EN: I think they do better on dry land.

DW: I would think the irrigated would wash their—

TB: I think you’ll find your drier land is where they really do good. Because I don’t think the buggers need any water. I think they get enough water off the grass in the early mornings—the dew that supports them for water. I don’t think they have to go to water.

DW: Yes, but wouldn’t wet ground be hard for them to live in?

TB: Oh, them buggers dig a hole anywhere. They’re like a doggone badger. They can put a hole in the ground—

DW: I never paid much attention to them. We always had them up on the ranch. They just made good target practice in the spring for a few days before the grass got too tall.

TB: See that little blue spot over there?

DW: Yes.

TB: From up here, that thing looks like a blue tooth (?).

DW: Yes, that’s just the windshield, might be some blue here yet.

EN: Hell yes, the sky is blue. Look at that.

DW: Two-thirds if you lean back. You ever seen 1080 used anywhere else on predators, Tex, around Montana here?

EN: I heard a guy fed some to his wife once.

TB: Not on predators. Only 1080 that I’ve seen used otherwise is in gopher poison is all.

DW: I see.

EN: Them boys over in Don Bell’s (?) are trapping the hell out of porcupines. They caught five or six of them already.
TB: Oh yes. I was over there one day here a while back. I stopped in there, and here they both of them come in yard on their snowcaps and big rifles over their shoulders, traps over their backs just up (unintelligible). Old Donny started telling me all about it. Hunting porcupines, doing away with all the porcupines there is. I said, “Hell there ain’t no porcupines left, why they doing that for?”

EN: Oh, they get one once in a while.

DW: What are they doing it for?

EN: Oh, to catch something.

TB: Just to kill them off, I guess.

DW: Just do something?

EN: I guess they want to kill them. The ranchers were squawking.

TB: Hell, they squawking? They don’t have much trouble with them.

EN: They caught a coyote the other day, I guess.

TB: They did?

EN: Tied a porcupine up in a tree and caught a coyote.

TB: Hung a porcupine up in a tree?

EN: Well, tied him to a tree.

TB: Oh yes. They’ll come around there. Maybe if they tied him to a tree, and they didn’t want to eat on him they’d come around there and circle around. Get around in there pretty close probably, but he wouldn’t go in and try to eat him if he was hanging on a tree. I know that because I’ve had them hanging there all winter and they wouldn’t touch him.

EN: See there? Different kind of (unintelligible) over in this country.

DW: I didn’t see them. What’s different about it?

EN: A lot more white on the wings.

DW: Oh is that right?
TB: I made a water set for a coyote over right down just about on the line between Dryer’s and Manning’s place here awhile back.

DW: A water set for a coyote. Who was talking about that, and I thought they were pulling my leg. I know I was convinced eventually.

TB: I caught a lot of them right there in that same place. Right there where I made this set. But I went over there the other day, and the other day I got this one in the snare. I caught it right here on a bank within 20 feet of there, but I got this water set in the creek there. The water was only about that deep, see? There’s no snag out here in this little [unintelligible], and I tied a beaver carcass to it. It was mostly sticking up out of the water. I went out there the other day, and I’ll bet you there was 25 magpies on that bugger. Whoa! And how come they hadn’t sprung that coyote trap I had there I don’t know.

EN: Land for sale there, Tex, 600 bucks to 800 dollars an acre. We ought to buy some.

TB: I got enough to buy an acre of it with. If I put all of my wife’s money and mine together I could buy an acre of it.

EN: Did you talk to (unintelligible) about that tax stuff?

TB: No I haven’t yet. I’m going to though. I’m going to start keeping some records of it myself, I’ll tell you.

EN: What the kids bought me for my birthday last year—that little pocket knife.

TB: I’ll be darned. That’s deadly.
Additional interview with Lester Barton. May have occurred at a later date.

EN: They called him a rabbit because he was going to (unintelligible) this fellow you had in your group?

LB: Yes. That’s gone, though, because of the rabbits.

EN: They came up what time? They came up at lunch to tell you this?

LB: Well, they let me know that he’s going to have a rabbit. So then we were haying then, and I was always working on the stack with the fellows. Seen (unintelligible) across the field and this one guy, and pretty soon I saw two guys go out across the field. I kind of watched and pretty I seen the two guys come back and a little later on I seen this other guy coming back. He was coming back awful slow. So that night, this one crew, we stayed out in the field unloading the bails on the hay or on the trucks. When they came in that night, then they threw a bunch of hay out quite a little ways and then they loaded it back on. Here this guy come in, and he look like he’d went through a meat grinder. Of course, I got all excited because I knew what happened. I pretended like I was excited about wanting to take him to the hospital and this and that. Now he didn’t want to go. So the next morning, he wasn’t on the crew. He’d went in the night before. He says that crew was too tough for him.

EN: So he turned rabbit, and your own inmates whipped up on him?

LB: Yes, they worked him over for spoiling their...they had a good thing of it. They had their freedom, you know, they was out away from the cells and that.

EN: How do you feel about law enforcement today as opposed to when you were in it? Do you think it’s as good, or do you think it’s getting worse? Like wardens and stuff, how do you feel about these guys we’ve got to deal with today?

LB: Well, I say it’s your judges that’s too lenient on them.

EN: Too lenient on the guy doing the crime?

LB: When they’d go back to hanging guys they ever time they’d done something real bad, they wouldn’t have no problem.

EN: Those fellows in prison over there that were in for life and murderers and stuff—do you think if they knew that there was a really a good chance that if they murdered somebody that they’d be hung, that it would stop any of them?

LB: Eighty-five percent of them it would.
EN: But that didn’t stop them because they knew they’d get locked up and that was it?

LB: I had one fellow on my crew, if he’d served all the time that he had coming, he had 164 years that he would have to do. But he started in Chicago and worked his way west in the prisons. He would work with getting into the wardens headquarters, and then get the warden to get him a parole and go to the parole board. He’d be out for a short time and right back in again.

EN: What was his offenses? What was he doing wrong?

LB: Well, he wouldn’t do anything (unintelligible), but he’d get another ten years or so. He had 164 years that he had to do, if he’d done all his time. He was a good, nice guy too, but he just lived the prison life. If they’d had a penalty to hang him, he’d have changed his game that he was playing.

EN: Did they have fellows in the prison when you was in there that were going to hang?

LB: No.

EN: They never had any?

LB: No. All the time I was there, there was a lot of them that they should’ve hung. There wasn’t anybody on what they call death row. I guess there wasn’t any in there.

EN: Were there any women in there?

LB: What?

EN: Where there any women in there?

LB: Women?

EN: Yes, women prisoners?

LB: That’s what Alma worked. She worked there eight years or almost nine years with them. She was a matron down there.

EN: Did she start about the same time you did?

LB: Shortly after, yes.

EN: What year about was that?
LB: Probably about 15 years ago. She got in eight years down there and nine months.

EN: About ’65 you started?

LB: Yes, then she had a heart attack down there.

EN: They have very many women prisoners?

LB: They don’t have any down there, no.

EN: Did they back when Alma worked there?

LB: They closed down this place down here about four years ago. They send them to Nevada.

EN: Oh, I see.

LB: No, Nebraska. No, I think they’re going to Nevada or something, California or someplace. Then they got halfway houses—the one in Billings and one in Missoula.

EN: Did you have very many guys that actually escaped down here at this prison while you were there?

LB: Not when I was there.

EN: How come in this new one they got so many people escaping? What do you think’s the reason?

LB: Well, they got too much time on their hands. See at that time, everybody was working. Every inmate in there had a job. He only got 25 cents a day, but he had a job to do. Like one guy he says, “I can go out and work, and save 25 cents a day.” They didn’t have no place to spend it, so he saved 25 cents a day. He was with me when I had a pig outfit down there. I was raising pigs there, and he told me, he says, “Keep my job for me. I’ll be back.” In 11 days he was back.

EN: He got out of prison, and in 11 days he was back?

LB: Yes, and he had to write...He says, “I had to write three checks.” He used a farm boss and the warden’s, or the deputy warden’s name together. Dwight was deputy warden, and Harris was the farm boss, so he called himself Dwight Harris. He was back—11 days. I saved his job for him because he was good Indian.

TB: He wanted to be in there, and (unintelligible) on the outside.

LB: No, he says, “I can’t be on the outside and save 25 cents a day.”
EN: How about this new one now that you claim they don’t got nothing to do in the new prison?

LB: Well, see they don’t work any inmates at all. A few work, but most of them they can’t work them. Some judge said it was unconstitutional for them to work prison labor. So that means no work.

TB: Where’s the bathroom out here, Les?

LB: The what?

TB: The bathroom?

EN: Where’s the bathroom?

LB: Oh, just keep your nose and go to the left.

EN: You’re still trapping out on the prison grounds aren’t you? Were you trapping before you went to work there, or did that kind of fall in line after you started working there?

LB: No, I didn’t while I was working there. I was trapping for the ACM Company.

EN: Oh, on the ACM grounds?

LB: Yes. That was all of the Mount Haggin land and livestock.

EN: Did you trap all the animals out there or just coyotes?

LB: Beaver.

EN: Oh, you trapped beaver?

LB: Beaver. I trapped muskrats (unintelligible) up by Warm Springs, we’d catch about a thousand rats out of there. I had another partner, Abbott (?), he was down in Lewistown two years ago. He’s a...Grandville Stuart (?) and Teddy Blue (?), that was his grandfather.

EN: He was a trapping partner of yours?

LB: Yes. He came to me and he says, “I don’t know anything about trapping.” He says, “A lot of people ask me about it because my grandfolks come here as trappers. Care if I go with you sometime?”
I says, “Get you a bunch of traps and come right along with me. What you catch is yours, and I’ll show you all that I can.”

EN: You know, Les, that’s funny. One thing I noticed about you is you always want to work with kids and teach them how to trap. Do you tell them a lot about the rights and wrongs and how to obey the laws and stuff all the time?

LB: Oh yes.

EN: You work that right in with it?

LB: That’s one of the main things is I won’t take a kid out that don’t have a trapper’s license. I won’t take a kid that won’t get out. I’ll show him once, and I won’t show him twice.

EN: What’s your success rate? Do they turn out every one a trapper?

LB: Well, I got one that’s teaching school up in the Aleutian Islands now. Thomas’ pictures that he shows in the Fish and Game, there’s a kid holding a fox out like this. That was his first fox that he caught. He was 12 years old. Now he’s teaching up in Aleutians. There’s another one that’s graduated out of Carroll College that he’s in Washington real estate—Dale. I’ve never had any of the kids that went (unintelligible) on me.

EN: Does your son Bernard trap?

LB: No.

EN: Your grandson does though?

LB: Yes.

EN: How did that come about your son didn’t trap, but your grandson does?

LB: Well he traps, and he can catch almost anything.

EN: Your grandson?

LB: No, Bernard.

EN: Oh, he can?

LB: He’s a good trapper, but one of the highway patrolmen here stole a fox out of a fellow’s trap and got caught. This guy instead of saying that Flynn’s brother was who it was that stole the fox out of it. Anyway, instead of saying Flynn was the one that stole the fox, he says that the
highway patrolman. That put all the highway patrolmen as trap thieves you might say. So Bernard...he says, “I wouldn’t set a trap as long as John Humble’s around the country.”

EN: It was John Humble who was the guy who caused all the excitement?

LB: Yes.

EN: Is he the fellow who stole the fox?

LB: No, Flynn was the one who stole the fox.

EN: How did Humble tie into that?

LB: It was Humble’s traps.

EN: Oh, it was Humble’s traps?

LB: Yes.

EN: Oh, so he’s laying for the highway patrol?

LB: Yes. Instead of saying it was Flynn, he says it was the highway patrolmen. That’s the way he put it, and that put all the highway patrolmen as trap thieves.

EN: Has Bernard been a highway patrolman for quite a while?

LB: He’s got three more years and then he can retire.

EN: So he’s been there 17 years?

LB: Yes.

EN: So he’s fallen into law enforcement just like you did?

LB: Yes.

TB: Is that your boy?

LB: Yes.

TB: He’s a highway patrolman.

LB: He’s up here in that copter, and now they’re flying around here in these flight—
TB: Is that old Johnny Humble around here yet?

LB: Oh yes. He has more trouble, he sure cusses the trapper’s association.

EN: How’s come?

LB: Because they cut off a month of rat trapping. They just do everything. They ruin the cat season.

EN: He’s blaming the Montana Trapper’s Association for doing things like that?

LB: Yes. I told him the last time I seen him, I says, “Why don’t you pick on the Fish and Game for a while, instead of Montana Trapper’s.” I said, “We went over there trying to straighten them out, but they wouldn’t listen to us.” He don’t belong to the outfit, so I poured onto him that if he belong to the Trapper’s Association you might learn something. Oh, we get into it all the time. He used to be an awful wino, but he’s straightened out and he quit. Now he don’t associate with anybody that even stops (unintelligible).

EN: He’s Lawrence’s brother, isn’t he?

LB: Yes.

EN: They never got along did they?

LB: No.

EN: I know Lawrence is kind of funny about drinking. Did he ever drink much?

LB: Well he’d take a drink but he—

EN: Was sensible about it.

LB: You couldn’t get him drunk. He used to spend a lot of time up at the game farm up there.

EN: Oh, with you?

LB: Yes. He’d come over when he was trapping snowshoes for the lab. He’d generally arrange it so that he’d come over about now, when they’d be getting ready to make their tick serum.

EN: They’d use snowshoe rabbits for their tick serum?
LB: Yes, well to raise their ticks. I’d go trapping rabbits. He’d bring the traps, and I’d go trap rabbits. He’d go buy fur.

EN: What kind of rabbits were you trapping? Or what kind of traps?

LB: Half hearts, [unintelligible].

EN: And he’d go buying fur?

LB: He’d go buying fur. He’d stay there was week at a time when I fixed one of the pens up there with—

[End of Interview]