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The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Suzanne Vernon: When was the first time you remember seeing loggers?

Neil Meyer: I started out summers, the summer after I was in 8th grade. I think that summer I started skidding logs, and working in a little neighbor mill. That was summer’s work until, I think it stayed about like that, they had a little crawler and skidded logs for a local mill. I think the summer after I was a junior in high school, I went to hauling logs. I hauled logs off the right of way road, Hungry Horse Dam, and Columbia Falls. Let’s see, and then after high school, and after Army, I went to work at Ferguson’s mill there at Bigfork. That would have been the summer of ’53 and came to the Swan probably mid-summer ’53. Worked in Cold Creek piling brush for the Forest Service. Run a cat. Never got around to leaving.

SV: That year when you were in 8th grade, do you remember if there were a lot of small mills around?

NM: Yeah, Byron Lee had a mill right across the road from where the folks live. There was several little mills like that. During that time, my dad and ? Paulson had a little mill. They cut ties. There was a lot of small operations, and in the Swan, too, at that time. Probably a lot more primitive in the Swan than they were down there. But there was Roder (Broder?) brothers, a fairly good sized mill at Creston. They hauled, when I first came up here in ‘55, I might be mixing my dates up. I came up in ‘55, that was on the old road. Broder brothers were logging then in Cold Creek. They were removing a lot of spruce beetle killed timber outta Cold Creek.

SV: Was that a salvage sale then?

NM: When we went up in there they was, they started removing trap trees they called them. They went up and fell green trees to try to, they did that in the winter time. You probably still see stumps 10, 12 feet high in Cold Creek. They fell ‘em then they come by the next summer then and took out those trap trees. I think by falling them they were hoping that the bugs would go to them and then they would be removing the bugs and burning the slash. They just took a whale of a lot of spruce out of Cold Creek and Jim Creeks at that time and that was initiated because of the spruce beetle. Prior to that, in my understanding, spruce really wasn’t too valuable. But they had all these spruce beetles and salvage timber to contend with so they promoted spruce and it was actually pretty valuable.

SV: So were they hauling back up to Creston?
NM: Yeah, hauling on that old road. There was a fair road once you got up to Swan Lake, below Swan Lake. About where the Terrace is now. There’s a change there. A pretty good road to there.

SV: How many loads could they get in a day?

NM: Oh I think just a load a day, initially.

SV: Were the trucks as big as today?

NM: Yeah, pretty big. Could haul more. No load limit and they didn’t cut anything small. You could go into a lot of those old units and during my time and prior to my time they probably went to about a ten inch top. So, about like it is in Alaska now, from what I hear. I haven’t gone up there and looked. These guys that I talk to, they say they just go up to the first limbs and cut them off and go to the next tree. They actually set up sawmills in, out on those islands, and all they cuts tops for boards for camps and stuff. The other stuff is exports. It seems funny to us down here when we’re going to four inch top or three and a half. A snoose can, we used to call it. We used to say go down to the snoose can.

SV: You first came here in the early 50s? What were they doing with the slash?

NM: Piling and burning it. A lot more than they are now. We had a 500 hour contract in Cold Creek, a guy I worked for. I think, it was for the Forest Service, I think we had 200 hours for NP, then. And cleaned up everything pretty good and piled it and then burned it.

SV: Were they taking anything else besides spruce out?

NM: Oh yeah. Especially for, they took quite a little larch. Larch and spruce. Very little lodgepole, then. Why, lodgepole was a weed. In those times, the old loggers they’d try to run over it, get around it, keep from having to pull it in. Of course, I guess I should say when we were... then after I got done piling brush that summer, I went to work for Bob Thomas and he logged for the Wineglass, for Rother’s at Holland Lake. I stayed in the camp, then, probably the winter of ’55-56. I stayed at the camp at the Wineglass at Holland Lake.

SV: What were they logging?

NM: Spruce. We were hauling into there. Broder was working on Forest Service hauling to Creston. Rother’s had a big NP sale, and they were working in the Swan and hauling into Rother’s mill at Holland Lake.

SV: What did they do with the boards?
NM: They were going to Missoula. I don’t know if you remember the old Wright Lumber Company and then they had a prefab house outfit, that Rothers were in on. And then they had a mill in Missoula, when Wineglass folded. Rothers were still in Missoula. They continued to haul the logs out of here into Missoula. Once you got over the Summit at that time then you were on pavement. Mid-fifties, on.

SV: Do you remember talking to the older loggers who were here?

NM: Oh, Babe, Dixie’s dad. And, his brother had a little mill in here. That’s the one I had up there at the Fourth of July. I think boards, for trade locally. I doubt that they hauled very many out. And then Uno Strom of course had a mill at Salmon Prairie, and also where he was homestead is now, where the house is. Frank Jette’s house now. So he had a mill there. All of his, he milled rough green to Missoula. Intermountain Lumber in Missoula. Shorty Koessler. Tauno Strom hauled most of his stuff for a long time. Tauno had a full size for the time. I’m sure he started out with a ton and a half Chevy and built up to a tandem Diamond T. And ole’ Buck Kesterson, he had a Mack with a tandem outfit, so they hauled as much as anybody. It wasn’t. . you know now it’s tough to get 5500 feet on a logging truck, board feet. And those ole’ boys, it was pretty common to get nine, ten thousand.. If they kinda picked their logs a little bit, they’d get up around eleven or twelve. They were pretty heavy, but they had nice logs.

Wilhelms had a mill, but I don’t know about.

SV: What about Wise’s?

NM: They did but that was before my time. Somebody else had a mill on our place here. Dixie could tell you about that.

SV: You said there was tie mills around Bigfork.

NM: Just little farmer outfits. Dixie and I even cut, we had a little mill, well, still do. In the spring when we were logging during the breakup, why we’d cut a few ties. Money to spend during the spring of course. We’d cut a load or two and haul them off the place.

Then these stud mill, that’s what happened to the trees on this place. We stud milled during the late sixties early seventies. Mostly late sixties. We stud milled all over the valley. In Elk Creek, Cold Creek. A little bit on this place and the south end of this place.

SV: Explain to me what a stud mill is.

NM: Yeah. Portable and then they would call it scrag (?) mills. Two saw, four inches apart and everything went through there. So that’s the way you got your two by four. The cant turned down then and went through saws that were two inches apart. That’s all you could saw was
two by fours. So a lot of waste, now. Because you weren’t making any inch stuff. Then it was just two by fours.

SV: Did you just burn the slash out in the woods, too?

NM: Yeah. I’m sure, I was looking in Ed Foss’ book, he was complaining about the sawdust piles wherever he is. Some of that could have been stud mills. What did he say, ‘65 he came? I don’t know where his place is. To me that sounded like scrag mills, or stud mills.

SV: What kind of equipment did you use to move the slash around?

NM: Same as now. Cats. Generally smaller than now, of course. We had, in fact I’ve still got an AC 5 I used in the stud mills. They were smaller. But that brush contract that I worked on in ‘55 that was an old D-7. So that was fair sized.

SV: How much of this was on Forest Service and how much on NP?

NM: Rothers was NP. Everything else, most of these little mills around, and Uno and I doubt that Uno sawed any on railroad, maybe some Forest Service but primarily private. But we uh, had a Forest Service sale or two that we stud milled. But for the most part we were on those old homesteads up Cold Creek and Elk Creek. That whole country in there was stud milled.

SV: People just wanted to open them up?

NM: Yeah, and there wasn’t any. . . this was up past the time that anybody was living up there. There was, well, Wards for one. Bob Wards in Missoula, I think that’s the homestead that we stud milled, well, Bud Moore. I think that’s the homestead that Bud Moore’s got. I think. Anyway, we stud milled that place. Bill Grant’s (?) and back up in there. We cut that. Lots of two by fours. We hauled two by fours out of here and delivered in Kalispell for $38 a thousand. Then it wasn’t long until, and of course that’s why we quit, too, the stumpage was eighty, ninety dollars a thousand. They wanted more for stumpage through the Forest Service sales that we could get for the two by fours. So that pretty well finished that.

SV: How could they ask so much? Who bought it?

NM: Well, it just, timber became more and more valuable. The good lodgepole they were making boards instead of two by fours. Yeah, a lot of that is hard to figure out. We bought lots of it for from two to four dollars a thousand and also had to pile and burn the slash. So that increased what it cost us. But then it was pretty reasonable. You could haul into Kalispell for $38 or so, everything was pretty relevent.

SV: Were most of the logger doing the same thing? Locally?
NM: Well, Uno had, you know Uno worked through. He had a big turnover. So a lot of people worked for Uno. I don’t know why he had such a big turnover. We always got along good with him. But he did. Everybody worked for Uno, at some time or another.

SV: You said you had to pile and burn slash, take care of it, too?

NM: Yeah, we did, on what we got from the Forest Service.

SV: Did you have to go back in and plant grass?

NM: Really, a homestead, we didn’t do much with. We skidded tree length, a lot of it. And a lot of it we didn’t. But I don’t recall ever doing anything with homestead slash. Somebody maybe did but we didn’t. Probably there wasn’t fire regulations that there are now. We never had any rouble with fire. We got shut down, I think in ‘65, somewhere along in there, for fire danger. They run us out of the woods. Everybody went to the coast fishing or went somewhere, then they had a fire and they couldn’t find anybody to fight it! So they never run us out of the woods after that. They’d shut us down at noon, but they’d never run us out.

SV: That’s a good point!

NM: Yeah, everybody left, cuz they. . . There’s very few logger-caused fires, anyway. That’s their livelihood. They have to pay pretty close attention. Anymore, the Forest Service and the State pay pretty close attention.

SV: When did you notice the major changes, clearcuts and different types of demand for timber?

NM: I think probably in the mid sixties they got to taking more wood out of here. And maybe some of that. . . there was O’Neal (sp?) Lumber company in Kalispell. They were a fairly large mill. And, Plum Creek at Columbia Falls, but it wasn’t Plum Creek. There was two mills in Columbia Falls, their names will go by me. I think Superior was one. And there was probably one other in Kalispell. So they were working pretty hard everywhere on National Forest. National Forest was putting out quite a lot of wood and NP was putting out quite a lot of wood.

SV: Did you notice a change in the loggers? Was it just yourself, and neighbors and friends, or was it outsiders?

NM: A lot of outside. I guess that’s always been my heartburn with Plum Creek. To me, we could have worked in this valley for a long time. And we’re still working in this valley, but it would have been more. They could have kept several families. . . and I never worked a day in my life for Plum Creek. But they coulda kept some resident logger working for a long time. So it was a big change, late sixties, early seventies, that they got after the logging more. Both on Plum Creek and National Forest. I can’t, let’s see, there was some big units around Swan Lake,
in the sixties. You don’t even know they are there, now. The one, when you go through Swan Lake and you’re looking right at it, it’s a big unit north of Swan Lake. Right up the highway, you’re looking at it. Don’t even know it’s there now. People raised heck about that.

SV: Was it natural seeded?

NM: I don’t know. Just the way it grew up. Well, let’s see. That’s probably not much history. Huletts, of course, they’ve been a logging family for years. I don’t think they homesteaded, I think they bought.

SV: When did the house logs start to be an item.

NM: Well, Jim Busch, started that up there. Don’t ask me when. Maybe late seventies. Joe Wilhelm and Adolph Anderson were his two employees. When they started. Adolph worked with me, we must have started that in, ’65 maybe something like that. I guess prior to that, Fenby brothers had a mill down there. Right across from Gordy there. I sawed in that mill there, for two years. I run the head rig in that for a couple years. Adolph was the edgerman. Ray Fenby had bought this stud mill, and I went to the woods with it. Bought it from Fenby and then we stud milled. Adolph, during that time, he worked with us in that stud mill all those years. What made me think of him, one morning when we were ready to go to work, I couldn’t see Adolph. I said, “Where in the heck’s our father figure at? I can’t see him.” Geez he got mad at me, calling him a father figure! He was burned up at me all day.

SV: Just didn’t appreciate that!

NM: No. (Laughs). Tuff worked with us a little. More for Uno. That’s aobut the time he went to the Forest Service.

SV: Did the Forest Service have much for crews here then?

NM: At Old Condon. Yeah, oh yeah. Quite a little going on. My brother worked trail crew for them. He and I were supposed to go to work for them in the spring. We were working for, Rother. And they’d moved out and were going to, logging up Lolo Creek and we didn’t want to go down there. That spring we were supposed to go to work for the Forest Service. About a week before the Forest Service started up, I went to work for Uno, but Jim worked for him. Jack Long did a lot of work in here. Big logger. Pretty big logger. He logged on NP and BN and Plum Creek, maybe never logged for PC. But for NP. Most of those logs went to Rother I think. And Intermountain in Missoula. Yeah, he had a fleet of trucks. Jim worked for him after he got done with the Forest Service.

SV: When did you have to start going outside the valley for logs?
NM: Let’s see, I started logging for Pyramid in ’71. I guess that’s when we started. We quit stump milling. We did a job for ? can’t think. Anyway, we did a job for them at Thompson Falls. Worked for them here and there for awhile. Then we got a chance to come back to Pyramid. Wanted to get closer to home. Got on for Pyramid in ’71. Jim and I worked together for awhile. Then I quit. Then I went back by myself for Pyramid. He quit and went to Bigfork. I guess that’s when it started, ’71. We did some logging here in the valley. The tree-sitters and all, you know, up there at Lindbergh Lake. We did some on Crane Mountain out of Bigfork. For the Forest Service. But, well, we did a lot on Forest Service, but it was on Lolo Creek, and over in Idaho, and over at Philipsburg. Down around Lincoln. So that would be about when it started, early seventies. And of course the last four or five years, I was lucky to get home on a weekend. We were in White Sulphur Springs, Idaho. Wolf Creek. Seiben Ranch. I always get a kick out of Max Baucus. Seiben Ranch is Max Baucus but he sold his interest in it now to his brother. He’s talking conservation. They just wiped that thing out. It made me so dang mad. Jerry Parker the forester would get it all figured out, a nice job and leave it looking good. And we’d no sooner get moved out and they’d put someone else in there and wipe out everything we left. Burn you up! But it, well you can drive by the Seiben Ranch and it looks pretty good now. When Max Baucus talks conservation, I always. . . around Lincoln they just literally wiped it out. I don’t know why, either. They run lots and lots of sheep.

SV: Did a lot of people have cows in here when you moved here?

NM: More so than now. Just about everybody had a milk cow it seemed like. But Huletts had cows, and Fred Kaser over here had cows. And Dixie’s dad had cows. We had some. There were several places up and down. . .

[End of Side A]
SV: When I talked to Harold Haasch about logging here in the thirties, a lot of it--most of it--was done with horses. The lumber that was hauled out in the forties, went toward Seeley.

NM: Yeah I think that was the best road. The road this way was pretty tough. It was tough in ‘50 or so. But they hauled out this way. Swan river hill was a mud hole. In the spring of course they didn’t do any hauling.

SV: It just seems hard to believe that they made money trying to do that.

NM: It was just that there wasn’t any money period. And of course, most of these guys trapped, too. Dixie’s dad. He always said he paid for his place trapping coyotes.

SV: He must have trapping something else besides coyotes.

NM: He trapped other things, too. He had a trapline, that he’d run in the wintertime. I’m sure that they did. Probably bartered with their lumber. Sold rough green to Missoula and stuff like that.

SV: And to each other. . . . What about hunting and fishing?

NM: I don’t get around to hunting and fishing anymore. I think, well, we see more elk and deer now than we did then. I think the deer have decided it’s easier living here on us that getting out and working for it. Uno used to talk about goin’ up on, take a work horse, and go up on Van Mountain, look right at it and tell it’s winter range. It’s kinda open. They’d go up there in late fall. With a work horse. Several families. They’d shoot deer until they 15 or 16 of them. Then they’d heel and toe ‘em behind the work horses. Just bring them down the trail. So if we wanted to shoot deer now. We wouldn’t have to go to Van Mountain and supply up. He talked about doing that.

SV: When did you first see elk?

NM: Well, of course in the spring, elk have always been here. I think we see more now. They bother us more now. They come and live with us more now than they used to. Like this Kaser meadow, there was always elk on that in the spring. But they would never come over on us. We see them go by. But now if we don’t go tell them to go somewhere else and eat awhile, they’ll set right there. A dozen or fourteen up there a couple of days ago. I was going up there with a tractor to pick up a harrow out there in that field and they were out there laying down chewin’ their cud. So I drove the tractor around. Two or three times we circled around before they decided to leave. Not very wild. They just set out there like cows. Eat till they’re full and lay down.
SV: How about bears?

NM: The last time we had bear trouble was probably... it was when Geri was due. We were out at Bigfork. We had just got electricity, and we had an old refrigerator setting on the back porch and we were using it as a deep freeze. In the spring. While we were out, them bears, they had been bothering us quite a little. Not destructive but just around and underfoot, and on the back porch. They tipped that refrigerator over and when they tipped it over they tipped it up on its face so they didn’t get in it. They pulled all those ammonia lines off the back and it just rusted everything on the back porch. That’s the last time we ever had any bear problem. I think they told everybody else that this was a poor place to go or something. You see one very rarely. You go out and they’re all around the edge. You walk a hundred yards into the timber and they’re there. Absolutely don’t bother any. Dogs were barking here three or four years ago. A yearling was up a tree out here. But drive down the road between here and Salmon Prairie and see them crossing the road. But they are absolutely no bother. Don’t ever think about it.

Had some lion trouble. Lost three calves a few years ago. In the last year or so we just haven’t seen any of them, either. Nothing bothers us very much. Quite a little open. We don’t have any garbage around.

SV: No pigs?

NM: Dad always had pigs. But I didn’t like them.

SV: I’ve got two more questions. They’re off the subject of logging. I’ve heard you talk about the flood in ‘64, what you guys did with the bridge down here to save it.

NM: Yeah, we spent... It got up, the water was up against the stringers, and trees were coming down. We spent whatever night it was. We spent on the bridge all night. It was Fred Kaser, Babe probably was there. I was there. Buck Kesterson. He had his little cat out on the bridge. When a big log would come down and hit the bridge, it would be crossways or so. We’d get it hooked onto and get it endways, get it shoved under the bridge. This end of the bridge, of course they’ve raised it now, but there was probably thirty inches of water across the road on this end of the bridge. The next morning when it got daylight, we looked around and here the whole north end was about half washed out and we didn’t know it then, in the dark. It’s a wonder somebody didn’t step into the hole...there was this big deep hole clear to the bottom. So if we hadn’t have been there it probably wouldn’t have stayed. It was about a day and a night and then things kinda got a little better. I think the county got up here then after that. Quite a session, anyway. Lots of water. We lived down in the old house then. We had lots of water in the creek, we didn’t even see it from the house. But after it was over, we went out east and here we see where there had been water where there hadn’t been any before. There was mud on the grass. We had more water, two years ago, down at the house. Things probably changed, something has changed. We had more water that spring than in ‘64 as far as bothering things.
SV: The bridge is higher now?

NM: Oh yeah. It got higher then, but as far as this place, there was more water.

SV: Another question that doesn’t have anything to do with water. Fire. . .

NM: South Lake? Yeah, and then we cleaned up after it. When these guys talk about how great wild fire is and how great the Yellowstone Fire was. . . what did they say in Yellowstone? I killed 7 elk or something like that they come up with. Well, the South Lake fire, why, small mammals and birds and deer with their feet burned off and still trying to go. And just, there isn’t too much wrong with fire. But when you say that old hard wild fire like is good, why, I got a big debate for them. You can almost duplicate that. . . and not have all that loss. You’d see where a log had been and here would be a whole bunch lof little skeletons. Mice or something I spose, all lying down under a log. Just birds and just everything. Just totally, so hot it went. . . what, one night it went 50 miles or some danged thing. It was there at Ovando one night. The next day it was just about to August. Just overnight. That’s about the way this thing in Yellowstone went. So I got a big debate for them when they say how good they are. Minimum of loss of life and stuff like that. It’s a bunch of hooey. . .

[End of Interview]