The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Suzanne Vernon: Were you born in Montana?

Al Wise: We were married in Illinois. My wife was born and raised in the Sweet Corn Capital of the world. Hoopeston, Illinois. This land out here discourages me every time I look at it when I think of what we used to have. People are arguing over getting rid of this timber. What's the use of letting it rot? Sure it was prettier. I'm not talking about the beauty. Those big trees are beautiful. But they're not beautiful after they get on the ground and are just deteriorating and we have to have the lumber. That doesn't make any sense to stop the logging. After all, a country never stays the same. I don't care, wherever you go...(miscellaneous discussion about Clinton)

SV: Do you remember who was president when you moved here?

AW: Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt. You know these people talk about Herbert Hoover. But I tell you he was as smart a man as we ever had. Depression was already well underway when he took over. It takes time before you can get an outfit like this moving. He had a lot of stuff Roosevelt put in. Like the CCC's [Civilian Conservation Corps]. The CCC's was a good thought. But they couldn't build a road anywhere that they thought it could ever be used. Otherwise we could have had a good road from Goat Creek to Soup Creek. In fact they could have put it clear on to Swan Lake with the money it cost them to put it up over that hill. Then they put in these roads on the other side of the river. Then they put in a road all the way from there clear down and come out there at Swan Lake. They put those in but, oh, it's a...This New Deal as they called it. It was a new deal. It was a disgrace to our nation. That was the starting of the downfall. I know the Forest Service men always liked the Democratic administration because they're wanting to get all the money they could get any way they could get their hands on it. That's what they wanted. They didn't like me very well. I certainly wasn't going along with them. I can't help that.

SV: What did you do for a living? You grew up in Illinois. When did you first come to Montana?

AW: We were married in September of 1930. Easter of '31 we were in Dillon, headed for Polson. Out of money. Had to get some more money so we could get the rest of the way over to Polson. My wife's half brother had a job offered him if he would play in the cowboy band. Well, like the rest he didn't have any money. Well I borrowed the money and got him out here. We had first gone to Colorado, where Reva's half uncle was. We went down there. The half brother said well he was going to give up that job. So my wife and her half brother's wife and
two children, back there in Illinois. They got together and said hold that job till I get there. . .
There we were all of us out there on the half uncle. It was rough.

SV: Then you came to Polson.

AW: I got the money so we could come. I had an old car and he had an old car. Kids had
whopping cough and measles on the way. We had it rough. My wife wrote kind of a history of
that. The kids had it here. I should have taken care of it. It’s here some place. My wife was on
the ball. When I’d get any money, I’d hand it over to her. It was up to here to make it go
around.

SV: She was good at budgeting.

AW: She didn’t spend anything on anything until she had to have it. If we’d allowed the country
to go back into Depression after the Second World War so we could even out. But you can’t go
from an all-out war effort, and back into civilian life without troubles. If they’d a let it happen to
my notion we’d have been able to come out on an even keel. But of course we’ve got so many
un-Godly people; they don’t want to give God the credit. That’s what we came in here for, was
to do Christian work.

SV: Do you remember your first trip here?

AW: Vic and I and my wife’s brother, we came over Piper Crow in the fall of 1932. We visited
with Hulett’s over here. Got acquainted with the Andersons and the Johnsons. We went back
over there.

SV: Can you tell me what their houses looked like?

AW: In fall of ‘32 when we came in here. Andersons were building. Have you seen that old log
house up on the hill just this side of the schoolhouse? They were building that house at that
time. Johnsons were, I think, had just gotten into their new house down here where Fry’s are.
Course, Edna Johnson and Tuff Anderson and those they were still in grade school when we
came in here. Then Fred Kaser, and Harry Harmon he lived two miles from the schoolhouse
back on the other side of the river. Over there where Morten’s live now. We lived the first
winter we were in here we moved back there on the old homestead shack. But we didn’t freeze
but we didn’t keep warm either. Then my brother went out to Somers and saw this...you see
there was three of the Anderson boys and Ainard (?) Johnson homesteaded this section here.
Then Arnold Johnson he was chopping wood down here and cut his thumb off. They took him
out to Kalispell. But it was too late to put his thumb back on. Then my boy was driving a logging
truck here in ‘54, no ‘55, for Amos Ahmstead (?) hauling logs up around Helmville, and hauling
out to Drummond. Ahmstead told me that there was a short log up on the top of the load. Their
lift was broken down so they didn’t have a lift that they had always been putting up against the
logs. They didn’t have that. They threw a cable over the top of the logs and was pulling them off
with a cat. When the cable came taut it just flipped that short log up on top end for end and right over on top of my boy.

SV: What was his name?

AW: Roger. Then of course our second boy we lost him. He was injured at childbirth. Lost him at 17 months. He was injured and he finally got the whooping cough and measles. Harold. We lost him. Then the daughter, she was born in February ‘36 when we came in here then. The youngest boy he was born here, Paul. Then the other boy he was a preacher. He had just left Lewiston, Idaho and taken a church down in Kansas. In July. Thanksgiving he found out he had cancer. By February he was gone. Kenneth. That’s been 12 years ago. (Daughter’s name, Alice. Lives in Polson.) They lived up here in ‘69. Up till ‘69 all the water that we used over here we had to carry from the creek.

SV: The first trip over here you came on this trail?

AW: We hiked. We let the horse carry a little luggage and something to sleep in. That’s, it’s only a good big day’s trip. No, in those days, we had an old barn where the church sets. I had milked a cow for my mother. She was in the old cabin where the road is now. (Alice) Then we had a kid brother, born 17 years after I was. Jess Franklin. He married a Hulett girl. Her name wasn’t Hulett. He was one of the Hulett daughter’s girls, which was an Erickson. They live out in Washington. Then he became a school teacher. Then it got pretty tight for him. I think the biggest thing he probably wasn’t a good disciplinarian. Anyhow it got pretty tight for him. He took a job taking care of apartments in Corvallis Oregon. All’s he’s got now is a little pension to live on, same as the rest. I get as high as ten letters a day through the mail. People begging for money. Most are stuff we ought to be supporting. If I had a million dollars it wouldn’t last long. All I got is just my little retirement. Outside of the place here, my retirement is very adequate. As long as I live here I don’t have to pay this enormous house rent. If I had to pay $800 to $1000 a month house rent. People think this big wages is wonderful. But it isn’t any good. It’s a disgrace to a nation. People don’t realize it. The government wanted to get that up. That’s the way they got income tax. Then they allowed the labor union. When I was on the railroad I belonged to a union. I was anything but a union man and they all knew it. I didn’t make any bones about it. I can’t say the union is all bad. We had to do something. Management was exploiting labor. They’ve carried it far enough now, the labor unions want to tell management what they have to do.

SV: I don’t imagine there were any labor unions here.

AW: No, there was never a union in here.

SV: What kinds of things did you bring with you when you first came?
AW: We just came here to camp. Three or four days. Just had something for a bedroll and a little bit of grub. Which was very little even then.

SV: What was a typical meal?

AW: I don’t even remember that at all. In fact sometimes I have to wonder what did we eat. I know my wife and my mother used to have carrot pudding. Potatoes, carrots and some potatoes. Ground meal. Steam it for about three hours. But we had a lot of that kind of stuff. I know one night just before we moved over here there was a guy came over to our place and we was there. We only lived a mile or so away but anyhow we had potatoes and we had applesauce, honey. Bread, of course. So that was the first time I ever saw anybody put applesauce on potatoes. It isn’t as bad as it sounds! It sounds awful but it isn’t all that bad. It moistens them up. We tried eating gophers and we tried eating these pine squirrels but they weren’t fit to eat. Gophers were better than they were. Bigger, too. We didn’t eat many gophers. Brother and I was sawing wood out there. Seventy cents a rick for sawing wood with an old crosscut saw. All we had was just this little old second growth stuff. It makes you go to get from a rick to two ricks a day. It really keeps you on the go. It would get hot. Real hot. We lived just above the feeder canal for the Pablo reservoir. And comes down from Lake MacDonald. All that water. Man, you talk about cold. It was just like ice. We’d jump into that. That’s the only way you could get in. We’d get cooled off and then we’d go back up and saw.

SV: So you were pretty familiar with wood?

AW: Oh yeah. In fact the place we were living on belonged to a guy from Polson. Jess Mosely. Some of these big old pines had blown over and back toward the stump where it was half buried in the dirt. He was selling wood and so he says, you get me that wood from those old trees. The sap was all rotted off of it you know. We’d dig down around those old trees and saw. Finally an old fellow over there that had been in the penitentiary. He was turned loose...he came along one Sunday afternoon. We were out strolling around. We never worked on Sunday. We were out strolling around and he and his old father in law they came along. Asked who filed our saws. We said we tried but didn’t know anything about it. If you bring me the file, he said, I’ll file them up for you. So we took our saws down to him. They tend their business. They were good people. Then we had Sunday school in our own home there. Across the canal there was some kids and they would come up for Sunday school. All we had was, I played a song that we sang on the violin. My wife would teach the kids the verses from the Bible. He loved these verses from John. “There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” He memorized that because his dad’s name was John. Then when my brother came out he had these 18 inch shoes. He started out on a motorcycle. An old friend of ours said I wouldn’t have that thing wrapped around my neck. Vic says I don’t intend to. Wasn’t too long and he hit some gravel. Well, he sold it. Along came a freight train, said, this car is going out to Whitefish. Got on car, stay with it, till Whitefish. So that’s what my brother did. That’s how he finally got out here. Through the Chicago yards, you know. If you get away from that you wouldn’t have any idea where to go.
A pair of shoes we just had to do the best we could to make a pair of shoes last the summer. Now they last me ten summers if they hang together. We walked everyplace. No use of trying to drive.

SV: That must have been quite a walk over here?

AW: I left the barn at five minutes to 8. At five minutes to twelve I was up on top ready to start down the other side. I thought well, I’ll sit down on this rock and cool off a little bit. Boy I cooled off right now. That wind was coming up there and it was cold. I started on down. Going down. My shoes they didn’t fit the best. My feet got blisters on them. I kind of hobbled the rest of the way. I could average my three miles to the hour on these trails. In fact I could go from the old mail center up here.

[End of Tape 1 Side A]
AW: Gun control. That’s the stupidest thing anybody ever heard of. They can take guns away from us but they can’t take guns away from the thugs. Even when very few had them. They never got Al Capone’s gun. They just went as they pleased. Killed as they pleased. And they knew right where to get him all the time. In fact I knew a young electrician personally in the church there in Chicago. He was sent out to do some work in Al Capone’s house. The boss took him out there. They searched him when he went in. Down the hall about 50 feet was where they kept their arsenal. He did the electrical work. The boss came and picked him up. One of Al Capone’s cars followed him. Down on Milwaukee Street goes angled across Chicago. They pulled him over. They searched his boss and everything else. It was just accidental. His boss usually was collecting. That day he didn’t have his gun with him and it was a good thing. You know. Our unions today is run by the mafia. That’s what’s the matter with the whole situation. It’s rough. But I’ll tell you, I think we’re going to see some awful things happen in the next few years. I tell you. Clinton has, I got the papers right here, where Clinton has already signed our boys over to where the U. N. has got control of them. You know that isn’t good common sense. Then go on back to time when ole’ peanut head, Carter was in. Then they paid Panama to take that Canal. Well we bought and paid for ten miles of ground across that canal and put in the canal. We have all our installations down there. Right now China has got both ends of that canal right now. Under their thumb. Where does that put us? Why I’ll tell you I’ve understood for some time now, I had some Mexicans here for awhile. I know Mexican intentions are of taking back California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas and putting it back into Mexico. We’re running school buses down to the line and picking up kids. Why? What’s the matter with our people? That’s a disgrace. I love our country but I tell you I just can’t put up with that kind of stuff. At my age all I can say is that I wish I could just get out of it and leave it alone, now.

(Misc. Discussion)

SV: Was there a school here when you first came?

AW: Oh yeah. This school and Swan Lake School were in the same district. Three trustees between the same schools. The old schoolhouse now is right across on the river bank from where the school is now. It set right in the middle of the road.

SV: The trees are all grown up now, and it’s shady.

AW: It was pretty shady right where the cabin is, even then. That part of the ground was on Ed Anderson’s part of the ground. Carl Anderson had this on this side. Then Ainard Johnson he died just a year or so before we moved in here. We knew his family and like, she sat here in the house, said, well don’t let the government tell you they gave you anything when they gave us these homesteads. I tell you, these women and children sat in here and the husbands go out there to Somers and Polson and Kalispell and work in the mills. Their husbands, some of them, drinking.
They hadn’t gotten rid of all the stills, yet, when we came in here. They were scared to death that we were going to find out and turn them in, you know. Well, that wasn’t our business and that wasn’t what we were here for. We carried on Sunday school here. They all loved to hear my wife play. She would always play for them. We had church in our home up until the late seventies when we built the church over here. I was out for twenty five years, so didn’t have Sunday school here then.

That was the best move we ever made, when I moved out. Because that’s where we found out, like the rest of these homesteaders here, you can’t make a living here. I could work in the summertime on the Forest Service but you couldn’t make a living. I got $90 a month to set on the lookout up there.

SV: When did you first work for the Forest Service up there?

AW: 1936. Van for three years. I was on Jim, Cooney, Elbow and Sunset. I was up on Holland then, in those years, the regular guy on Holland was Bob Hartwick. His wife a writer. I was on Cooney lookout one morning and I just turned in a false smoke, down on the river the day before. So they said no it’s just a shadow there. It looked like smoke coming up. So then on right past Foresters and past the clubhouse there, why one morning I got up and I see this smoke over there. I studied it and studied it. I couldn’t get the ranger station. It was right at breakfast time. I finally called Bob Hartwick and he tried to talk me out of it. I said, “No, I know it’s smoke. It can’t be anything else.” A cloud wouldn’t stay in there that long in the first place. I said, “It’s got to be smoke.” Well, I thought I better get breakfast. His phone and mine were on the same line. I heard him call the ranger station. He got through. He turned it in as his fire! After I’d argued with him that it was fire and he claimed it wasn’t.

SV: Can you describe what the lookouts were like then?

AW: They were all alike. They were just a small building about twelve feet square. They had a little cookstove in them. Alidad and everything all set up on there. So that we could see a smoke or lightning strike or anything. We could turn over there and give us time to try to locate best we could how far away it was. Because as you know this country never was contoured. I don’t know why it was all contoured over across the mountain. That’s all contoured. But this country never was contoured. So that makes it hard for a lookout to determine too much. Then we had lightning rods from on top of the lookout. From all four corners we had quarter inch copper wire running down to ground. One fall I left up here at Van and we’d had a little rain that fall. So they says come on down. So I came down and boy, we got another lightning storm so they send me over on Cooney. The next spring I went up there the lightning had hit in there. Burnt out all the telephone wires. It burned that copper wire that went down to the ground. It just disintegrated. You could see where it came from one place there right across the trail. Some of that old scrub alpine. You could see where it comes burrowed a fir right there and come out the top of the tree. Next spring we had to put all the wiring back in before we could
make any kind of contact with the ranger station. The packer when he took our grub up to the 
ranger station, he found out that it was gone.

On van, he couldn’t get quite to the lookout with his mules. There was a knoll down below 
where he’d park his pack string. He’d bring them up one at a time. We had an unloading 
platform just below the lookout. Just big enough to turn a mule around. When he took out of 
there why he would just turn the mules all loose and take his bell mare and lead her down. I 
said, “Man, don’t you ever lose any mules?” No, he said, not as long as I keep the bell mare 
down with me. They’ll get a mile behind maybe, but the first thing you know they’ll come 
around and they’ll catch up. Then they’ll stop and feed. But they’ll, you don’t need to worry 
about those mules. They’ll be down there when I get there. It’s a . . . we had lots of nice things 
about it. It wasn’t easy. It was hard work. We had to, each spring we’d put in a camp up there 
where the trail crossed Lion Creek. Then we’d maintain trail 41, the East Foothill Trail. Goes 
from the loop road down here clear through the Holland Lake. We’d maintain that and then 
we’d go up and get the Van Lookout line. Go on from there clear up to the top. There used to 
be a lookout over on Owl Point (behind Napa?) It was a rag shanty they put up there. But that 
was, man, they tell me that lightning just struck all around that. They claim that John Hulett 
over here was knocked out for awhile. (See Hulett interview). I don’t think there’s any question 
but he probably was. I thought I was going to see the smokejumpers though. The last summer I 
was on the Forest Service. Jump over on the Big Prairie district. But when they got up there was 
too much wind. I had turned in a smoke over there. Of course I couldn’t tell how far over it was. 
I could see it. I told them the only way they are going to see it is to come up on the divide and 
they could spot it from my lookout across. They got up there and says there’s no way that I 
could have seen it. Well, how could I have turned it in if I couldn’t see it! I just couldn’t tell how 
far over it was.

Then we had a bad rainstorm and lightning storm and another fire down here. But we had so 
many strikes at that time. The dispatcher said, “Don’t turn in any more smokes. Just keep track 
of them the best you can. We can’t take care of what we got.” Hundreds of strikes we had 
where we’d see them flare right straight up. The rain put out a lot of them. This one right over 
here was right on the line, the lower Swan line. Right close to the line between the lower and 
the upper Swan. I turned it in. The next morning they went down. They about gave it up, but 
finally they smelled it. That’s the reason they located it. Otherwise, they weren’t very far away 
from it. It just wasn’t making enough smoke that they could see it. But that’s the way they 
cought a lot of the fires. You know if you can smell smoke out there you know good and well 
that there’s a fire there someplace.

I liked the work fine. But that being away from home all summer. Oh my wife, she would go up 
to the old mail center. We had one of these old cast iron telephones up there. She’d call the 
ranger station and they’d put through the call up to the lookout. She’d come up once, 
sometimes twice, a week. Make a call. We’d talk for a little bit. Of course, we all had what they 
call intensive watch periods on the lookout. Twenty minutes out of each hour we had intensive 
watch periods. If they were going to set a smoke to see if you were on your toes, it would be in
your intensive watch period. They set one when I was on Cooney. They had a mail center up there. So I caught that. I said, watch it there. They acted like they didn’t believe me. They knew good and well what it was. Right there at the mail center. They never acknowledged it. Then they had a Ford truck, nice truck, they hauled the pack string with. Take the saddle mare and saddle horse, and a couple mules to the lookout. Why they’d drive as far as they could. The first, at that time, Rudy Kaser, was the alternate ranger. The ranger’s name was Thol, and Ivanthol was the ranger down here at Swan Lake. (Two different Thol’s? Check this and also Buster Redd interview.)

SV: I bet a lot has changed from when you were up on the lookout. . .

AW: My wife always put a light here in the window. Now because the trees are grown up you couldn’t see it. You got to go out here a ways to see up there now. This was all cleared out here. We could see right through there. She would put a light in the window. When people would go through here, cloud of dust. I could see the cloud of dust. I couldn’t see the rig that made it. I’d wonder who went through. Course there was nobody in here then. Just homesteaders here, anyway. Down here at Swan Lake, had what they call the Devil’s Elbow. You never heard of that? Well, you know where that gas station is as you go out of Swan Lake? And you can see the road that goes up over the hill? That was the old road. Went up there and Devil’s Elbow was just a short turn and right back because of the terrain. It was solid rocky and you couldn’t make a road through it.

Hollopeters down here had an old Model A truck and John he was telling me, “Royden went up there and the dual wheels on that...” Well, Model A never built a long wheel based truck in the first place. They thought it was a long wheel base. I’ve seen those scenic cruisers come up here and get around the curve.

SV: You could see some of that from the lookout?

AW: I could see some of that from the lookout. You can go out here in the car and see Swan Peak. Doesn’t look like it’s any bigger than the rest of the mountains from there. There’s about a thousand feet difference in Van and Swan Peak. I think if I’m not mistaken.

SV: The trees, the forest, must have looked more open, from fires or something?

AW: There wasn’t any logging. There hadn’t been any timber cut outside of what the homesteaders cut for trees, house logs. Get these cedar trees mostly for shakes. They would split better. Some of them used a tamarack if you could find a tamarack. In fact it used to be if you could go out through the woods and see these big tamaracks where they went in a cut a notch out of ‘em on the side about so high, so they could see how straight the grain was. Even then, down that low, you could tell what you had anyhow. You gotta get away from those butt logs before you ever get to where you get anything that would make good shakes. That’s mainly what they used their cedar for was shakes in this country. Then they had salt blocks...
Then after they took Rudy Kaser out of here and sent him up to Hungry Horse, anyhow he was up there and that’s where he was when he passed away. He was a good alternate. I sure appreciated him. He was decent. The dispatcher we had in ‘36. He didn’t like me. Part of the time I was on the ERA (Emergency Relief Setup). We’d work ten days out of the month and then have to be off the rest of the month. That’s the reason he didn’t like me. So they, at noon, we got a fire report right on down just back here a mile. Anyhow, there was a fire over there. We lived across the river in a little old shack. That was our first summer in here. Rudy Kaser took me and a couple other fellers...

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

Off-tape quote: “Rudy Kaser he was tough. No getting around it. He would set out and you couldn’t hardly keep up. He was about six feet tall.”
AW: The only way you went out in the wintertime was snowshoes. Christmas, nobody ever moved a wheel after Christmas until the snow went off. But when the snow went off the roads were all solid. Soon as they started plowing the road, they would freeze. Then, boy I tell you, those places got soft. You couldn't say we had a road. It took an hour and forty five minutes in the best of road, in the summertime, to make it from here to Swan Lake. Twenty two miles. That was pushing the old Model T just as hard as it would push. Well it wasn't much of a rig. Ole' Henry Ford says I'm going make a car that the poor man can have. And he did. A lot of them sold. They were only about five, six hundred dollars at that time. It got us around. It was transportation. That was all we needed. Then our truck driver we had at that time. We'd go up. We'd pick rock off of the landing field up there when we didn't have something else we had to do. Oh I enjoyed work. I always liked work. When I was a young feller, before I ever, just starting school, I would ride on the fender of the tractor. An old All Work Tractor. Most people never heard of it. It would throw oil. It had a main bearing on the fly wheel there. I was just oil speckled from one end to the other. I'd ride that thing. Especially plowing, when Dad would let me take the steering wheel. By the time I was eleven years old I was going with the tractor, the corn sheller. Then Dad got a thrashing machine and I went with that. Traded that onto a bigger outfit. We finally lost it. Because you couldn't make enough in what you could thrash in the summertime. Corn shelling, course it all went together. If you lost one, you lost them all. I run the tractor there. I had a guy come to me when I was, well I wasn't sixteen yet. He said, “You ever go anyplace and need a recommendation as a tractor man, all you need do is say so.” I've always liked tractors.

I love horses. But I don’t love them in the summertime when they have to fight flies and everything. They get switching and rubbing their nose on the neck yoke and everything. It just bleed, you know. I don’t like that. Cuz I love horse flesh. I appreciate the horses and what they’ve done. But a lot of times, especially in fly season I sure hated to work with them. The guy I worked with after that. We’d been brought up a mile and a half of each other. He said, “I need a man. You’re just what I need right now.” He was born and raised on the farm there and he hated horses. You have to get up so early in the morning and start currying and working horses. They had two farms they were a couple of miles apart. To get in your day you put in a real day. Everybody expects you to be in the field by six o’clock in the morning and they stayed there until six o’clock at night, outside of for their noon hour. When you get in at night you still got to take care of your horses. In those days nobody, you never seen nobody, you never seen anybody working in the field on Sunday. Like dad said my horses need their rest same as I do. When we work them all week long, they’ve got to have their rest. Course we always went to a little Methodist Sunday school a mile and half away from where we lived at that time. Then when my uncle came back from the war he had, my dad had to get on another place to get on fifty miles away. Then we moved away from there so. Then three years, we given up the farming. We were on our own. Dad says one fall, “Well, Alfred, I expected to pay you but I don’t have anything to pay you with.” I didn’t expect any pay. I got my board and room. I had my clothes. What else did you need? That’s the way we used to work. When Vic and I came out
here. We didn’t care what place we were working on. We didn’t know where the line between us was. We didn’t care, as long as we were trying to do something where it would help us out. One of us had anything, well, the other one had it. That was all. It’s really the same way today. It didn’t matter. We worked together a lot. We neither one of us able to get out and do anything worthwhile now.

SV: How old are you?

AW: I was 90 years old my last birthday, April 25. My brother was 89 May the 17th. No, folks here at church have been awfully good. I had to take thirty eight cancer treatments. I never drove a trip myself. Neighbors here all took me in.

SV: Well, you did get a church going here.

AW: Yeah, but we don’t have many coming. People just don’t want the Word. They don’t want it, and you can’t stuff it down their throat. God never stuffed himself down their throat. Nope, he says you have to accept me.

SV: When did you first get saved?

AW: Dad let Vic and I take the old Model T roadster that we had and drove three miles over to a little Christian church. They were having some revival meetings over there. After the service somebody come up to us and started talking to us, wanted us to get saved. Well, we were saved. Then they didn’t have any baptistry there in the church. Later we went into Hoopster that was where my wife was born and raised. I never met her until just a little over a year before we were married. I went back to, when I was working for this guy I did everything. he always called me Oscar. Did you ever see the funny paper of Oscar Presinbottom. He was great on reading that. He just started calling me Oscar. I was in their family, just like one of the family. Known everybody since we were kids. He came to me one day after we got done combining the oats. Oscar, he said, you know, you have a job here all summer. But you know as well as I do that the old man would be out here all day, “Why don’t you have Oscar do this and do that.” I know what I want done. It would just be easier if you found something for a little while. I’m not going to let you go, because I got to have you. If you could find something. . . “Well”, I said, “I can go back to the canning factory.” It would have been about six weeks. I didn’t quite get my time in before he called and said, I need you. I said I got another week’s work here. It’s worth five cents an hour for every hour that I put in, that I stay here. I get a bonus of five cents if I stay till they close. And he was paying me. he could have got all the men he wanted for thirty five, forty dollars a month. And he was paying me sixty. And I’d asked him fifty. He was batching. He said there’s no way I can see fit to pay you that. I hadn’t gone back to work for him over a couple weeks. He said, well, Oscar, I’m going to pay you your sixty dollars. You can have your Saturday afternoons off. I said, “I didn’t give a rap for my Saturday afternoons off.” And that’s the way it worked. We worked Saturday just right up to quitting time, same as every other day. I had full run of the place, just like it was my own. He never bothered me in any shape or form.

Al Wise Interview, OH 422-022, 023, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
He was a graduate of University of Illinois with an electrical engineer degree. So he was electrician, but he wanted somebody he could depend on on the place. When he had to be away. Of course if he didn’t have something for me to do on the place, then he always took me with him. It didn’t usually work out that way. Usually had so much to do. . .

SV: Did you have a sawmill when you moved here?

AW: Vic got a hold of this little mill after we came in. We had it set up over there. Turned out to be over on his. We were sure that mill was setting on his. We logged, we didn’t pay any attention to where the trees were coming from. Getting anything to try to. . . we cranked our logs through by hand. We didn’t have any power feed on the carriage. We had a good day, we could saw a thousand feet. We worked liked we were colored boys. Shoveled all the sawdust away from underneath the saw. Handled all the slabs by hand. Handled the logs by hand. Trying to do what we could to make a living.

SV: Who were your customers?

AW: Well, we didn’t do very good on some. Really the only thing we had any sell for was the clear pine. So, we would saw there in the wintertime and stack it up to dry. When we could get it out in the spring, we’d haul some of it into Kalispell. After we found out about Halfmoon up there, we took our lumber up there. They graded it out and gave us a good price if we had over twelve inch boards. Every inch of twelve inches we got more money for it from Halfmoon. But the rest of the guys, they didn’t do that good by us. The other lumber we didn’t have any sale much for it. You couldn’t even get rid of it for fifteen dollars a thousand. No, we worked. We just did everything we could to fill in. But, as I say, I couldn’t make a living off the Forest Service year round. And I couldn’t make a living off the sawmill. We’d run out of timber here. Of course at that time, we could get some trees off the Forest Service. Even pine trees for three and a half a thousand. I don’t know what they charge today, if you can get it. . . I don’t think you can buy it for three hundred dollars a thousand today. But the Lord was good to us. We didn’t really suffer any. We had what we had to have. We sure didn’t have any frills of any kind. We walked, a pair of shoes wouldn’t last us . . . I bought a pair of Whites one time. They didn’t last long enough to bring them home. All leather soles. Made that way so they could put corks and hobnails in them. I didn’t want corks and hobnails in my shoes. I couldn’t take my shoes off every time I went in the house. But I did, I never wore any corks or anything in the lookouts. Some of them did, but they marred their floors. Those lookouts all had hardwood floors, everyone of them. Beautiful floors. I tell you we just, couldn’t help but envy your wife that she might have a floor like that in the house. Our first floor we had out of these ten, twelve inch boards that were sawed here. Weren’t too true to begin with. Then they’d dry out and cracks between them.

The Huletts down here. For the floor in that, they had taken poles and made a floor. Flatten off the top a little bit. We didn’t have to sweep the floor because the dirt would all fall through.
But that’s the way people lived. Take the old timers and the old Finlanders. They came in here and built a little tiny shack, put up with that until they made enough money that they began to build a barn. After they got the barn built then they’d build a house. That barn’s what makes us our money, not the house. Well, that was right. But I tell you it makes hard living. As I say we carried all our water from the creek over here. Then we finally got this ditch down through here. Brother and I put that down through there. Most of it by hand. Got team and plow some, from Roy Fox, used to live over there on 27. We didn’t have to worry about the water, because it came through his meadow. He wanted to water there in the summertime. When it came time to hay. He’d say, I’d have to shut the water off now. It didn’t matter. He’d go shut it off, and soon as he’d get his hay up, why, he’d go turn it on again. It came down from Pony Creek, across through on Meadow Creek, and Alder. Oh I had trouble with the water rights guys. They were bound I wasn’t going to have water right on Pony Creek. But that’s where it was. Pretty hard for them to change it. I said, I don’t need a water right on Alder Creek, because when I want water there’s no water in Alder Creek. So a water right on there isn’t doing me any good. It’s got to come from someplace else or I don’t have water anyway.

SV: Do you have a well here now?

AW: Yeah. Our daughter and her family came up in ’69 and drilled a well up here. Then we built this room on back, right over the well and all.

SV: Did you build the cabin?

AW: We built this in thirty seven. Then we built this “L” onto the side. We’d have Sunday School up here and we didn’t have room. Then we put this room on here. Then when the daughter came up we drilled the well over there. I was still working on the railroad. So then I said, well, we got to build over the well anyhow. You need the room, so just as well build a room from the back porch right over the well and all. I built it so I can still pull the well. Pull the pump out and all. I’ve had to pull it. I’ve had to put in a new pump.

SV: How far did you go for water?

AW: A hundred and twenty three feet. The church is down a hundred and seventeen. But right down the road here Williams is only down about thirty three I think. My brother got a good well up here at fifty five. But we’re down to a hundred and twenty three feet here. They went through some hard stuff. Well, it’s this little pea gravel. It was just like concrete. He had to take his point and build ‘em all up before he could go on through it. He was quite awhile drilling that well. It’s good water. Something about the church water. It’s got a bad taste to it. So what we did for the parsonage. The boy, he got a hold of the filter rig that they make. So they can drink it now and it’s good water. The water at church has got a bad taste to it. It tastes like it’s coming off of old dead logs, is what it tastes like. I don’t know what’s the matter with it. The filter took care of it. After they had the fire we put a new filter on it.

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SV: One of you guys built some ponds behind the Swan Centre?

AW: Yeah, up there (behind Harold Haasch). Yeah. Vic had a cat so he went in there and dug out a hole in there. Brought the creek down, part of the creek down there (See rough notes from Vic Wise for more detail.)

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
SV: Did you get in on that pond building stuff?

AW: No. There’s a little pothole back here where we run water, when I run the ditch, we run it back there. The second sawmill that we got a hold of, we had right on the edge of this pothole back here, we run the ditch down there. And there wasn’t a whole lot of water coming, but there’s enough water that by the time we got the logs back and ready to saw again, there was enough. It carried our sawdust off. It saved us all of that work. But that first one over there, it just about killed us off. Shovel all that sawdust. We didn’t have power plant enough. We didn’t have anything enough. But we sawed a lot of lumber. Anything that wasn’t good select stuff we couldn’t hardly sell it at all. Anything, like number 4, you couldn’t even give that away. They’ve even changed the grade on it, now. On Number 5 now, it was number 4 then. And as far as your game. I love to see the game as much as anyone else. That’s the reason they killed the wolves off in the first place, because the farmer’s couldn’t live with them. They’d kill their stock and everything. That’s what they are doing now. You see college guys, they think they know everything. But if they do, they sure don’t act like it. I love the game just as much as anybody. And I’m not hunting anymore. I haven’t gone out and gone hunting. I haven’t got but one deer since my wife passed away. And we quit then. We’d rather just go buy a beef. We’d had so much wild meat we didn’t care for it. I think that was brought on because my brother, he’d killed several bear. He’d bring bear meat into town. The kids didn’t say anything against it. I thought, if they can eat it, I can, too. We finally got so we didn’t want any wild meat any more. But now, I’ve been getting some good meat now. Charlie and Ellie, they get meat. They always bring me up a bunch of steaks over. I’ve come out good on that.

I tell you, you can’t outgive Ellie. She’s born and raised over there in India. You betcha. She spent... when she came to the states, she never knew anything but a washboard. I expect she’d tell you plenty that you might want to hear. I thought I knew the valley, but after they logged it all off and put in all the roads, I don’t know much about it anymore. I don’t even hardly know where I am. But when it would come to getting out and going up these trails, I knew where they were. I didn’t find them. I could make my twenty minutes to the mile, regularly. I could check it. Course I’m short legged, and instead of going up these grades, it looks like you go down hill. I’d break into a trot a little ways going downhill. I’d do that all day. We had our camp set up here, on Lion Creek. We’d go clear up and over to Palisades Lake clearing trail in one day. That’s a hard trail. I don’t know why it’s a hard trail. So rocky, for one thing. Awful rocky. I helped put in around... that Holland Trail, the good trail that they made. Rudy sent me up with the guy to help make, some riprap work, but I know that riprap has been gone years ago. That’s the first riprap work I ever had done.

Rudy came up there. We were out and kind of wandering. I said I didn’t think there was any use of us doing any more, here. We were more or less standing around. Looking around, seeing
what we ought to do Saturday morning. Rudy came up and we sat there. By that time, said, let's go on up and get us a bite to eat. We hadn’t told him we’d been up to the lake there and a couple fish up there about so long. We didn’t have anything to fish with. So, they got so they always called it.

Oh, Glenn Huston was that truck driver’s name that was in here when I was in here... Everything was “every-gency” wire, instead of emergency wire, that they strung around for telephones to the fire camps. So we picked up emergency wire. Said, but yeah, what are we going to use for a hook? Fred, he wouldn’t say anything. So, then after we got dinner, he said, I want to see the rest of the trail. Up to Holland Lake, that’s all he wanted was to see that fish. So we went up there. Course nobody had a fish pole. I looked around and grabbed an old club, from about here to the ceiling. It was a club that didn’t have any spring to it or anything. So we strung a line on that. Rudy he reached up there and pulled his hat off. He took out a fish hook. So he handed it to me. I said, No, go ahead and fish. I didn’t know anything about it. Course he knew I didn’t have a license. But I really never thought much about it. But then that was all right. Rudy he wasn’t out to give anybody any trouble. So, oh boy, that fish came along there you know. Man, I gave him a jerk, you know, like I’d have been getting these little ones out of here like that. Of course, I lost my hook just that fast. No, no, no, he said. I pulled it out of his mouth first. So, next time, he was bound I was going to fish. No, I said, I don’t know anything about fishing. No, go ahead, he said. Here he comes. So I threw in. He came and said, Don’t pull on it until I tell you to. Okay, he’s got it! So I gave it a jerk. Pulled him up to the top of the water. I could see I’d broken the leader. So I jumped in after him but I wasn’t fast enough! But we had a good time anyway. Yeah, we had a lot of fun.

When we were cleaning this trail 41, East Foothills Trail. Oh, it was hot and sultry. I said, well we better take a five. So we set down under a tree and I laid my hand back against the tree and found something. It felt like a handle. Took a look at it. Here was an adze. Looked like a brand new adze. It had been resting there so long, the handle was all rotted out of it. Soon as you took a hold of the handle it just broke right off.

Then somebody came here when I was out and stole that. They took whatever they wanted. We had some of these big crocks and stuff. Wife had put down sauerkraut and stuff in. They took those. But I was glad we moved out anyway. We made some real good friends right around Missoula. (Went to work there for the railroad) I worked in the roundhouse until, building fires in the locomotives. I didn’t do that all the time. But then they needed a boiler maker helper. But the new men, they always put them on the hot work. There at the roundhouse, you’d leave your street clothes on but you always had your overhauls and jacket you’d put on over your clothes. You can’t work around that steam without a lot of heavy clothing on. Shovel coal? Man you shoveled coal. Course then after I went in that boilermaker work then you’d have to crawl through that fire door into that fire box. It was hot work. I’d go in first. Then the old boiler maker he’d holler and say, Wise get out of there. You’d been there long enough. He’d go in there and do any finishing up that had to be done. That’s the way we
worked down there. Even that was hard work. But a lot of times you weren’t working. I tell you get on those grates. The grates would get warped. Get on that old shaker bar, that long, you’d just feel like a gnat on that old shaker bar. Then sometimes take the pick and go in to clean off the honeycomb inside the firebox. That heat in there, throw that old pick just as hard as you could. You felt like you wasn’t doing a thing.

SV: I need to fill out the rest of my questions. What Nationality are you?

AW: I have always understood that my grandmother was related to William Jennings Bryan. So she had to be English evidently. Probably not all English. She probably was part German, too. My granddad, they came right from Germany when he was six years old, on the boat. On my dad’s side. On my mom’s side, they were evidently English, her name was Shoe. We never knew much of Mom’s folks much.

SV: What was your father’s name?

AW: Roy Wise. His name was John Elroy. I don’t know where my dad was born. I think he probably was born in Illinois. When my grandpa first came over, they stopped in Ohio, then to Illinois. That’s where they settled. So he got a farm there. Of course by the time I really knew who he was and all, he was retired then. Then we spent a little while in Michigan, burned out in Michigan. Then back to Illinois during the war.

SV: Were you in the service?

AW: I should have been by all means. I tried to get in the service in ’28. They said my eyes weren’t good enough. After I was married in ’32, couldn’t get a job anyplace. Went back, they said my eyes weren’t good enough. Besides I was married.

SV: If you could offer advice, what would you say?

AW: I’d tell them the first thing they got to do is seek God. Without God we’re not going to do anything. I know people don’t like to hear it. They didn’t like to hear it when Jesus Christ was here; they put him to death, too. But that’s what he came for, was to die for your sins and mine. But you got to accept it. Just like I had a thousand dollar bill. I could hand it to you, but if you wouldn’t take it, it wouldn’t be worth a nickel to you. And it’s just the way with his salvation. But that’s the first thing. Really the friends you make in life are really the things you make through the church. I’ve got a lot of good friends who aren’t church people. I don’t mean that you haven’t got other friends. If you have a good church group, that’s the first place to grow. Get right with the Lord. Just because everything is going easy, start to take it easy. That’s when Satan begins to work on you. Human nature is not. . . You know the Word of God doesn’t progress until it’s under affliction. That’s just the way it works. If we think we’re going to get through life and don’t have any trials, we just as well start thinking again. In the first place it’s
under trial is where we learn to make something of ourselves. If we don’t have any trials, we’ll never turn out to be any good. I don’t care if it’s on the job or where it is. Nothing goes without some trials. I don’t care if it’s working for somebody or what you’re doing. You’re going to have to get out and fight it out. God told Adam that you’ll live by the sweat of your brow. And that’s just the way it goes. It’s the only advice I know what to really give.

A feller asked me the other day: well, what would I do different? Well, how do you know what you would do different. If I was under the same circumstances and everything, I’d a probably done just what I did. . . I’m not trying to say that it was all right. You learn by trial and error. It’s just like they’ve asked me, many, many people have asked me: What brought you to Montana? All I can say is God brought us here.

I said, we didn’t know anything about Montana, only just what we’d studied in school a little bit. (Discussion about trip from Illinois to Montana)

[End of Interview]