Oral History Number: 317-001
Interviewee: Clay Lewis
Interviewer: Mary C. Horstman
Date of Interview: March 4, 1994

Mary Hortsman: This is an interview with Clay Lewis at his home on Nine Mile Road on March 4, 1994. The interviewer is Mary Hortsman.

Mr. Lewis, you said that you moved up here in 1941.

Clay Lewis: Yes, I came in here with people out of California in ’41. I was running draglines with them people. They came into Josephine Creek here. They were mining gold. That was really my first experience in the Nine Mile.

MH: What did you do before that?

CL: I was raised on a farm in California. During the Depression, we lost everything we had. You went down the road with a pack on your back. Yes, talk about terrible times. Let’s hope we never see that again.

When I came here in ’41, there wasn’t a dollar around here anywhere. The money was coming from the gold.

MH: What did folks do up here besides gold mining? Was there much farming in the valley?

CL: There were farms, but they could barely survive on those farms. The survival was just on the edge. I remember Finsters (?) up here. They had just come here. Rob told me, “If I would have had a quarter back then, I would have had lots of spending.” They purchased that ranch up there. I think they bought that ranch in ‘37. So, Rob and Bruce have been around as long as I have, a little longer.

I was quite familiar with the mining, cabins, and people. I was just a young person. I was very interested in the mining. I followed through on that. It has been a good area for me. I am not working here now. I got a lot work in the Lincoln County up in there. I worked up there for years in the summer time. I may go back there.

MH: One thing I am kind of interested here in the ’40s mining gold, didn’t the federal government shut down most of the gold mining during the ’40s?

CL: When the war started...

MH: How did that effect mining?
CL: In ’42, they did. I was working up here. They came in and took over the equipment. They moved the equipment to a project. I went with one dragline to Farragut Naval Base in June, 1942. Then I was there six or seven months at the Farragut Naval Base.

MH: That’s out near...?

CL: Idaho, right north of Coeur d’Alene.

MH: I don’t think of a naval base being in Idaho. (Laughs)

CL: It was good. It was a trading camp and boot camp. It was right on the shore of Lake Pend Oreille. There was just...It was just the greatest job. I even wound up in Arkansas. I worked down there on the atomic bomb project for eighteen months. From there into Arkansas... This here was the real country. The climate is so much better than Arkansas.

MH: Yeah. Did folks...what I kind of wonder about is during that shut down of mining during war, did folks up here continue to mine and stock pile the gold for when they could work it again? Or was it totally shut down?

CL: No. There were a few little hand miners. There was some in every gulch like McCormick Creek, Josephine Creek, (unintelligible) Creek, and Pine (?) Creek. On up the country, there were older people living in these cabins and would get a little gold. It would kind of help them with their livelihood. That’s what went on.

Over time, they just...There was one every once in a while that was too old. Finally, there aren’t any left. They are all gone. Even their cabins are gone. That’s all disintegrated. I knew them all quite well. I made it a point to talk to them and visit with them. I liked them. They were characters. They were different.

MH: Did they talk much about the old days here up in Nine Mile?

CL: They never talked about much of anything. They were friendly. I don’t think you could get anything out of them. They were just plain...They would carry on a conversation if you kept asking them questions, but they never volunteered on their own. They were all different and kind of a recluse in a way. You couldn’t help but like these people.

MH: You know Jeff Vetsch (?) of the Superior was interviewed. He talked a little bit about the fact that during the Depression, up at Cedar Creek, a lot of folks came in during the ’30s to try to mine. The government, in fact, encouraged these people to take up placer mining. He mentioned that lasted for about a year or two. Then most of them found out they could make more money bootlegging. Did you ever hear of anything going on like that around here in the Nine Mile during the ’30s?
CL: Well, bootlegging and beaver hides.

MH: Oh really?

CL: When that first came here, a beaver was worth fifty dollars. Nothing else is worth fifty dollars, but a beaver hide was. It was all so strange to me. There were people buying beaver hides at these....Well, natives...They trapped these beavers. I didn’t know anything about beaver trapping. It never interested me. I know that there was talk like at Alberton down there. I knew one man there very well. He was buying beaver hides. He ran a little grocery store. I never paid any attention to it.

That was one of the things going on there. There was bootlegging and beaver hides. I don’t know where the hides went to or anything about it. Of course, there were beavers in the creek. There were lots of beavers all up and down the creek. Also, there was lots of fish. I mean the creek was really full of fish. So what has happened to the fish? Well, I don’t know.

MH: At least at that time, when you hear in the ‘40s people were able to make a living like you said with the beaver hides and fish from the creek.

CL: There was a lot of fish, but there was a lot of game. You know a buck deer, a sack of flour, and a little coffee, they were pretty good. That didn’t hurt the game any. They didn’t waste anything, I’m sure. They took care of it strictly as survival. There was a lot of game there and the creek was just full of fish.

MH: Sometimes, you hear some of the retired Forest Service folk that were working out in the district area in those days. They will talk about how they knew maybe poaching went on. But you said nobody wasted anything. People were using it to live on so nobody bothered them. Nobody got too upset about it.

CL: It was survival. I’m sure nobody paid any attention to it. There wasn’t any money. If you can imagine a country without money... It was just the other day that I was talking to some people about tough times. I explained that I played the guitar all my life. I got out of school just to get out of school in ’35 and ’36. I had this job herding sheep, but the manger didn’t have any money. He couldn’t pay me. I was entertaining the folks at that farm there. We were having a little camp wagon. I was entertaining them one night a week for food. Nothing more, just food. I would get quite a bit. That went on all through the winter. That was survival. That was part of the survival.

MH: That’s what you did in California before you came?

CL: Yeah and all over that country too. There wasn’t any money anywhere.

MH: When you can up here in 1941, were you working for somebody?
CL: Yes.

MH: Who was that? Do you recall?

CL: I had been working for them out in California. They had mining.

MH: Was it a company?

CL: Yes. It was called the Beaver Dredging Company. It was out of Canada. I was running draglines for them. I made a lot of money running draglines back in those times. They always paid the drag men and the shovel men lots of money. They would get twice as much as anybody. At five dollars a day, it was a tremendous job back then. A day...five dollars...Times have certainly changed since then. You can’t help but wonder where we are at here. Really? (Laughs)

MH: Yeah, five dollars doesn’t get very far anymore.

CL: Back then, that was a good day’s work and that was lots of money. Anyway, times have really changed.

MH: Where did the Beaver Company have its dredge or dragline operation?

CL: We started right around Josephine Creek. We started right there and worked out. We worked not all of it out, but a little for a couple months. Then we moved over on McCormick Creek. We were there three months. We took out about forty-five thousand dollars in three months. The man who had the claim lived in a cabin there. John Henry was his name. They gave him about forty-five hundred dollars, which was lots of money for somebody who didn’t have any. Then, we moved from there up to the Nine Mile. Are you familiar with the Nine Mile?

MH: I have been up there a ways.

CL: We were working off that Nine Mile Valley there out from Soldier Creek and Twin Creeks. Evidently... the gold was fed into the valley. From the sides, I think glaciers brought the gold in from the sides. That’s how I survived in the gold business. I understood where it came from. Knowing where it came from, it wouldn’t take me long to line out this bet. They worked in there a long time. They took a lot of money out there.

Then the war shut them down. We went in there September of ’41. We quit in June of ’42. That was about nine months. They came back in here in 1946. The war was over in ’45. They came back in here in ’46. I worked for a little while for them. Then I went into Idaho. I started my own hill out in Orofino, Idaho.
MH: Oh yeah?

CL: Oh yes.

MH: It’s neat country over there.

CL: It is nice country. It is a little milder than this.

MH: Were you draglining over there too?

CL: Yeah, I still got the same big washing plant that I had then.

MH: Really?

CL: Yeah, I still have that same plant. I have different draglines of course.

MH: The plant is around fifty years old then?

CL: You just repair it. Just like some of the dragline equipment, it was better then than it is today. It was more industrial. Today, they are keeping things by high speed engines. They speed up the engines. Of course, they wear out quicker. Everything else has gone to that. It is not as rugged as it used to be. The engine was still as good then as it is now.

MH: I have been up a few of these gulches and have found washing plants just parked there.

CL: Where’s that?

MH: They are just up some of the side gulches. You find a washing plant here or there. Apparently, that has been there over the years.

CL: There is little works up there. They are not very big though. I know the people real well. Anyway, there are not many washing plants left. There is one on Trout Creek, but it is kind of a junker. I thought about buying that. I saw the owners one time, but I didn’t have enough money in my pocket to buy it. I only have a fifty dollar bill. (Laughs)

MH: You worked up around Quartz Creek one time.

CL: Yes.

MH: I ran into Max Johnston over there.

CL: Oh yes.
MH: He mentioned I should talk about Quartz Creek.

CL: He’s one of the good guys. I was over there last summer talking to him. There is a lot of money up in Quartz Creek.

MH: Is there?

CL: Yes, a lot of money up there. If I was younger, I would be quite interested in it. I have the equipment to do that. It would take a bunch of it. He did a lot of testing around there to achieve patents from the Forest Service. He was hauling me around there telling me about it. I didn’t really know anything. I knew a little about it, but I didn’t know what he knew about it.

This gold is in old channels. These old, ancient channels are where the gold is. It is on the side, up on the hill sides. I knew some of that. The boulders were a big issue.

MH: I have seen some of the big boulders up there.

CL: I have the equipment to do it. It would take a lot of equipment, but I got a lot of work that is easier.

MH: (Laughs) When did you work on Quartz Creek?

CL: I worked there in ‘55 to ‘57.

MH: Where about on the creek?

CL: Are you familiar with that at all?

MH: We were up in there this fall. I had been up Tucker Gulch and Louisiana Gulch.

CL: Okay. Tucker Gulch, I see. We started at Tucker Gulch. This is about as good of ground as I have ever seen. We left a patch in there. We couldn’t dry it out. We started around Tucker Gulch and worked up. There was lots of gold here. It was big gold, big nuggets. Fingers and handfuls of the suckers!

We had a lot of clean ups in there. I had a partner. He was an elderly man named Erick Vincent. I will tell you a little bit about him. He is ninety-three years old. I call him up every year and we gab over the telephone. He is just as sharp at ninety-three as my age. He can’t see, though. He is blind from Glaucoma. We talk about the gold.

Going back to Quartz Creek and Tucker Gulch, there was lots of money from Tucker Gulch down. We worked on up. It was okay, but the value was probably about a third of what it was in
old Tucker Gulch. Evidently, Tucker Gulch fed Quartz Creek. It brought the gold. It came in from
the side and poured it in that little bottom there for a ways.

I know that people were after me not long ago. They wanted me to work a piece of ground on
Quartz Creek. That is why I was in there and looking at it. There is so many lash and trash deals
in there. I don’t know how you could work and take care of the environmental part like the
water. I don’t know how you do it. I have a lot of work anyway. I wasn’t really interested.

I did visit with Max Johnston and he took me up there and showed me around. We had talked
about it. I said that I had lots of work to do. What he wants to do is putz and work himself in the
hole. I think he makes about fifty, sixty thousand dollars a year just putzing around there just
working on those benches. Up on those benches, on this whole river channel, I have found
about three deposits of these. That’s what he is. He is working up on these benches. I think it is
richer than hell. To me it is.

The gold, high grain gold is pure. It is a nine, eight which is the same as this cut. Nine eight is the
purity of the gold. There is a lot of work there.

MH: I notice that you mentioned the boulders on Quartz Creek which is that upper region. You
get there above Tucker Gulch up towards a...I can’t remember the folks that had a place up
there. There are these huge boulder piles.

CL: Yes.

MH: From what I understand, a lot of that stuff was moved back in the early days by derricks
and wenches and stuff.

CL: They did have derricks and hydraulic systems. They had hydraulic systems for everything.
They had to have derricks to handle the boulders.

MH: Did you ever work with any hydraulic mining at all?

CL: No. I have seen them. In California, they have some massive hydraulic systems like you can’t
imagine. They had to put that on the bottom. Before 1900, they couldn’t do that anymore. They
just washed away mountains of gravel. In California, there are lots of ancient channels. They are
way up in the mountains. The ancient channels are not where they are today. They are ancient.
They ran in different directions. The geology of this thing is really vast. Who knows much about
it, really?

They were working on these high river channels, ancient channels. They were in the mountains
hydraulicing these channels to get the gold. There was lots of gold. They never recovered it all.
There was so much water that swished on and torn down the country. They got plenty of it to
survive, I guess.
You just can’t imagine what the world was full of. The geology of this gold… That’s why so much of the gold is still here. They do not understand this. You can’t get this out of school, especially in a placer part like how I worked gold. You can get the road system parts out of schools. This placer is something else. I started at it as a kid on a dragline working around it. There wasn’t any other money anywhere else. The only money was in the gold mining. I was fortunate to be able to start at that. I made a vast study of it. I am still here! I am still in business!

MH: (Laughs) Still in business.

CL: Yeah.

MH: You mentioned hydraulicing before. Did you ever see hydraulic mining up here in Nine Mile at all?

CL: No, I have never seen it working, but I have seen where they had been working.

MH: We had noticed that this past summer when we were up walking around.

CL: Did you?

MH: I just wondered how recent some of it had been.

CL: It probably went on in the ‘30s. When times were...

MH: Real hard...

CL: They were making work for themselves. There wasn’t any work around here. There wasn’t a dollar around here anywhere, if you can imagine such a thing. There wasn’t anything around here. It’s hard to believe such a change from nothing. Now money won’t buy anything. It is so cheap.

Let’s hope it don’t collapse here. A lot of people are buying gold from me now. I just didn’t want to sell very much gold. I always held gold. Then, when I needed money, I would sell the gold. They are just plaguing me after gold. I got no idea why. They are afraid of the money. The value had deteriorated so far. The history throughout the world is… Have you ever read on history of money?

MH: Oh, a little bit.

CL: A little bit, okay. Money becomes unacceptable after a while. They return to the gold, but we don’t really need that. That would be so crazy. That’s what they are thinking.
MH: That’s what these folks are looking for, a security investment.

CL: They are trying to protect themselves from the inevitable. Let’s hope that never happens.

MH: I agree with you there.

I think what I’ll do is I’ll turn the tape recorder off for a minute. We will get the maps out and look at some of those cabin sites. Then we will turn the tape recorder back on. How does that sound?

CL: (unintelligible)

MH: Okay.

CL: That Texas kid...He is up there.

MH: Okay. We are kind of talking about the cabin here in McCormick Creek that I think was built possibly in connection with the Anaconda Company logging camp that was up there in the ‘20s and ‘30s.

CL: It wasn’t to me (?), but I don’t know. When I came here, there was one down here right out in that flat across from Caroline Devil (?), there. They had a big barn that they used for logging. They used horses to skid into the railroad. They had railroads running up and down all of these valleys. They were up the side of the creek (?) too, the railroads.

MH: The railroads were still here when you were here?

CL: The beds and ties were there. The ties were all rotted away. There were no tracks or anything. The ties were there and the railroad beds were there too. It was real evident. The railroad was still there, but it was grown up with brush, weeds, and everything else. It would be hard... You could see it at times.

There was one up every one of these gulches on both sides of the valley. The loggers skidded into them. They must have loaded them with steam shovels or something. They would skid in there with horses. They only worked about, maybe at most half a mile above the railroads. All up and down this valley and clear on up...

MH: That is an extensive operation. Do you remember anything about the old dredge? This is a 1927 map that we are looking at. Do you remember the old dredge up near Kennedy Creek? Do you know anything about that? That is before your time, I know.

CL: Yeah, but the hole was still there. I used to go up and look at that. I wasn’t smart enough to figure out where the gold was. They were working on the gold that came from the side of the
hill. I thought, “Well, it must have come down the valley.” It was all kind of crazy to me. It never went anywhere. It was stuck in bedrock and this and that.

MH: The hole was still up there in 1941?

CL: Yeah.

MH: Wow. I know...According to the records, it didn’t operate very long. Apparently...

CL: They didn’t do very much. It seemed like they didn’t work very much at all. Who knows about these promotion deals. You know there is always a bunch of crooks involved here, pretty much. There are jacks and crooks in mining, see. Myself, I was never involved.

I had a partner or two way back...We owned it all. The last partner I told you about is ninety-three and blind. I get put on hold for a long time. I didn’t have any more partners. I had a couple of good ones. They were just great guys. This has always been a tough one. The gold helped us to survive really. It is still tough. I know a little bit about what you don’t do.

MH: Yeah. (Laughs)

CL: Really! Of course, you learn through work.

MH: I know with some of these cabins that we have been investigating, we were guessing that some of them were built during the Depression by folks who were up here.

CL: You are probably right. They came in here and they would build a cabin for a place to stay. It was all survival. I think you are probably correct on that. Those cabins were probably built during Depression times. I knew quite a few people in cabins around here. Every gulch had them. It might have been... a cabin...

MH: That’s what I was kind of wondering if maybe you could help us identify some of these folks that had been in some of these cabins. I have got some pictures and the map out. Maybe we could just take a little time and go over some.

CL: I am sure glad to try.

MH: It doesn’t hurt to try.

CL: McCormick Creek...this one right here. Right now, I know who is in that cabin, John Henry.

MH: John Henry was. Let me write that down. Now he was just a single miner?
CL: He had a brother Bill Henry, but they didn’t get along very good. John Henry lived in that cabin.

MH: He didn’t have family with him or anything?

CL: Just himself. He had family. He had a niece. He gave her the money that he got from that property up there. That was pretty good. He didn’t need the money...John Henry didn’t need the money. He could survive on a few fish, a sack of flour, and...they didn’t need a lot. They didn’t have automobiles or anything. They would walk back into town. Yeah, that was going on there.

MH: Did the niece live in Missoula?

CL: I didn’t know anything about her. I knew he had this niece. We were working there. He used to come and talk to me every day. I knew him quite well. I didn’t know anything about the niece.

MH: So John Henry was working this claim up here in the ‘40s? Had he been there earlier?

CL: Yeah, he had been there working in the ’30s. He had it opened there working. It was good ground for equipment. He was surviving on...That’s what he was doing see.

MH: Okay. Did he move out or...?

CL: Died.

MH: Died. Do you remember when that was?

CL: I moved out here when the war came following this (unintelligible). He died in between. Let’s see. I was talking to people that knew him. They are gone now too. He died of gangrene, I think. He had an infection in his leg or something. He died of that which is a terrible thing.

MH: It is.

CL: Anyway, that’s what happened to John Henry.

MH: That would have been in the ‘50s maybe?

CL: I think it was in the ’40s.

MH: ‘40s. This cabin is on Marion Creek. That would put it...This is this one here.

CL: Yeah.
MH: We don’t know very much about it at all. It looks like it was used in the 1930s. We can tell from some of the cans and some of the litter that was around.

CL: A man by the name of Fred Stone (?)...I didn’t know him. He was right down there, and that house was all falling down. There is nothing left of that. He was the one that worked up there. He supported a family with the hydraulic works up there.

MH: Okay. We have noticed some hydraulic workings up in that area.

CL: He was working there, this Fred Stone (?). I don’t know if that is his cabin or not.

MH: But you do know he worked up on Marion Creek?

CL: Yes, he did. As you’re going up the creek, he worked off to the right. He worked in there on a little tributary feeder in there. I always felt I could develop a little work in there with equipment. He never turned me loose on it, but I always had work.

MH: As I recall, this site, there does look to be on the other side of the creek from the cabin site, that there had been a big washing plant up in there.

CL: There had people been in there. They were wondering there and this and that. They were unorganized. We have a lot of that. Everything heating up (?). Nobody really understands the business, but they had to give it a whirl. They would always lose.

MH: Then they don’t stay around.

CL: They are hard to find. I know there is one who was just a hell of a good guy. He was just a good person. He didn’t know. He had just turned a bunch of guys loose. He was a good person.

MH: Who was that?

CL: Mike Earl Johnson (?) down there.

MH: Okay, this is a cabin in the First Hope Claim.

CL: I don’t know anything about that one.

MH: Nothing about that one.

CL: The First Hope Claim, where is that?
MH: That is up here in sixteen north, twenty-three west. Let me turn this off for a second so we don’t waste the...

[Break in audio]

CL: I know these cabins.

MH: Okay, this is the First Hope. It is a little tar paper shack over here on the west fork of the McCormick.

CL: I know the cabin real well. I know the people that were in there.

MH: Who was that?

CL: Oscar Furdel (?). He was up there all the time. I think the cabin is still there.

MH: Yeah, it is. We were in there last fall just to look around. It looked like it had been used fairly recently.

CL: It has because I went up there one time up by that cabin. I was up the gulch and there were some people. They were following me and they had a six shooter. I bet they had land (?) bought up the gulch there somewhere. They had been to that cabin. Then when they found out who it was, they didn’t care. Anyway, that’s been awhile back.

MH: There is still a washing plant parked up there. When we were up there, we noticed the one that had old license plates on it. It was still parked up there. It had a tarp over part of it.

CL: Oscar had worked in there for years in the creek right there. I never seen him with any gold. The old timers worked out there quite a ways. There was gold in there in that little gulch at one time. They worked right in there quite extensively. They brought water out of McCormick Creek to a ditch up high.

MH: We had seen part of a flume up there too.

CL: I walked up...I used to hunt up in there a little bit and I walked to that one time. I was just curious about the flume.

MH: That was probably Oscar Furdel’s (?) claim up there?

CL: Yes. Yes, it was.

MH: Okay. Good.
CL: Yes, and Mary Furdel (?) is still in Missoula there somewhere, with one of the daughters.

MH: She would probably be a good person for us to talk to.

CL: Yes. I haven’t seen her for a while. I used to see her every once in a while randomly. I haven’t seen her for quite a while.

MH: That is going to be really helpful. This log cabin is all the way up here above Eustace Creek, way up there.

CL: I don’t know.

MH: It sits up on...The road comes across the face of a real steep hill. It sits down below the road. It was called the Log Cabin Claim, I think.

CL: Oh I see.

MH: There is a collapsed adit [entrance to an underground mine] behind it, right behind the cabin.

CL: I don’t know. I knew people up there, not really. In older times, I knew people up there.

MH: Do you remember any of the names off hand up in that area?

CL: No. I didn’t know them like I knew the others.

MH: These people were probably part mountain goat to get into this cabin, I tell you. It is on a real steep slope. There is no easy was to get into it.

CL: I don’t know.

MH: Okay. This is the Nugget Claim.

CL: Where’s that?

MH: Let’s see. That’s going to be sixteen north, twenty-three west. That’s going to be section thirteen. That’s going to be Kennedy Creek or up above Kennedy Creek.

CL: I remember that adit there. I don’t know anything about it.

MH: When we were up there this fall, they had barricaded the adit off. There was a big sign warning of bad air in the adit.
CL: Yeah.

MH: Have you ever heard of bad air in any of the mines up here?

CL: No.

MH: I thought it was probably to keep people from messing around.

CL: It was probably to keep people from...They didn’t want anybody in there.

MH: There is a settling pond below it. The road comes around. There is another area up above that looks like it has been bulldozed.

CL: I don’t know anything about. I was down there on time, just below it. I went in there with this one fellow. He wanted do some testing in there and wanted to know if I would come up there. I had said, “Yes, I would be glad to.” He had a hole in the bottom there, a test hole. It had a little gold in it. It was rough gold. The rough gold had come from a source right there, a vein or something. We never did anything with it. It wasn’t all that great either.

MH: Do you remember who might have had it? Any of the folks associated with it?

CL: No, I don’t remember who had it. The man that had the claims in there was Johnny Woldoor- (?). He was from eastern Montana somewhere. He had the property.

MH: Okay the last name was Woldoor?

CL: Yeah, Woldoors. His name was John Woldoors. He has been dead quite a long time now.

MH: Okay. We will see if we can look him up in the records and at least find out. Okay, a Little Marion Creek cabin, this one right here. I remember this one well. This one has, along the creek, some really impressive hand laid rock work that was done.

CL: This may be Prescle’s (?), Little Marion. I suspected that was where he was.

MH: Was up Little Marion?

CL: You know he was working when I first came here, but I...

[End of Side A]
MH: Is there anyone still around from that family?

CL: Yes, there is. I’ll tell you...Let me get a piece of paper.

CL: Emma Moki (?) was one of the best of girls. She lives at 601 Cleveland St. in Missoula. She is the nicest person. She is pretty near ninety years old or eighty some years old. She is very intelligent and really nice.

MH: That will be a big help.

CL: Emma Moki (?). She may have another name now. I don’t know.

MH: She was one of the daughters you said?

CL: Yes, she is a beautiful person. Her husband and I used to get along. He has been dead now for several years. This lady lives at 601 Cleveland St. unless she left the country or something. I haven’t seen her for a couple of years. She has always lived right there. She is the nicest person. I am sure she would be glad to answer anything.

MH: This was a nice cabin. We noticed when we were up there that there was a lot of hand set flat rock on kind of like almost a porch.

CL: I don’t know. There have been other people in there. I have been where people have had claims up on Little Marion. I didn’t know them very well. I knew them causally but not very well.

MH: Okay. Do you remember any of the names off hand?

CL: No, I don’t. I never paid a lot of attention to these people.

MH: You had enough of your own work probably.

CL: I had a lot of that. There were people that were real interesting to me. They came from another era. I would love to visit with them, but you couldn’t get anything out of them. You had to bait them all the time with a question. Then they would talk, but otherwise they wouldn’t talk. I am a lot like that. They were really like that. They wouldn’t tell you anything.
MH: Do you suppose, coming from the time period that they had been up here or worked up here, that they were worried or suspicious of people.

CL: I am sure they weren’t. There wasn’t anything but... It was just so terrible to try to survive. That was the word, survival. We are so different than they are now. You can’t even comprehend it. In one lifetime span, all of that has changed.

MH: My folks had told me a little bit. Of course, they grew up in an urban area back in Chicago. So, it was a little different.

CL: Oh yeah. You are a city girl.

MH: They had hard times.

CL: That would be entirely different.

MH: That is what I have wondered. Was there ever much... When you read the real early accounts of the gold rush period out here, a lot of times the miners were concerned about having their claims robbed or pillaged.

CL: Oh yeah. Robbing of the claims... This always went on.

MH: So that went on even on up into the ‘30s and ‘40s?

CL: Oh yeah. They trusted nobody. You can’t blame them. They would have their little sluice boxes in these creeks. They wouldn’t clean them. They weren’t getting very much going anyway. They didn’t want anybody to rob their sluice box. It certainly was a different time. We’ll never see that again. I hope not.

MH: Did they ever catch anybody trying to rob a sluice box?

CL: No. They used to steal from me. It went on for years. They stole thousands of dollars from me. I never could catch them. I could catch on to the stealing, but I never could catch the crook. I wouldn’t steal or bother anything. But the crooks are indifferent or something. They must have always known where I was. I never could catch them.

MH: Do you think it could have been a neighbor?

CL: I almost knew who it was, but I couldn’t prove it. You can only do that so long. Finally, something will give you away. It is bound to. Something would have tripped you up.

MH: What would you have done if you would have caught them?
CL: Nothing. Nothing. I would like to teach them a lesson to leave my stuff alone.

(Phone Rings)

MH: Okay. This next cabin that we’re interested in is the Pollium Cabin. That is over here on Favorite Gulch. Does that ring a bell with you at all?

CL: I knew the people. I didn’t know the cabin.

MH: You know the Polliums?


MH: So that was a family that lived up there?

CL: They had a claim up there. I didn’t know them very well, just vaguely.

MH: We just wonder... It is a nice cabin. We wonder whether there was just a single miner that lived there or if he had his family with him?

CL: He had family in Missoula. He used to go up there all the time. He might have taken somebody with him, maybe some of the family. They would putz around up there a little bit.

MH: We had noticed there are some flowers and bushes that aren’t really native to the area. We thought somebody planted them there in the yard.

CL: They probably did. I never had been there to their cabin. I did know the person a little bit, not very much.

MH: There is some really extensive what I think were hydraulic diggings right up near the cabin. I am just not familiar with that area. What about Pats Creek? Did you ever spend anytime up Pats Creek? That is way up there. We had a cabin up Pats Creek that we...

CL: I did a lot of work...I did a lot of mining with the people that were up Pats Creek. They were down on McCormick or Nine Mile. I’d get lot work from them. I leased them property. I worked down there with them for years, the McKellegeets (?).

MH: McKellegeets?

CL: Yes, Stanly McKellegeet. They were all...his uncle, his dad, and his kid were up Pats Creek.

MH: And you think that it is this cabin here?
CL: Yeah.

MH: Okay.

CL: I think it is. They were right there.

MH: There are a lot of hydraulic workings up around there.

CL: They were hydraulicing. Ground sluice... But that was a long time ago.

MH: Now is that before you started?

CL: Yeah. They were in there probably when I first came here. I knew the people real well. This Pat McKelleget is dead. Stan McKelleget, the nephew, is very much alive. He lives along here (?).

MH: Oh he does.

CL: I talk to him all the time.

MH: Oh really?

CL Yeah, they come over here every year. They came last year. They are just a great bunch of people. All the rest of them...Only his father and Pat McKelleget were in on these Pats Creek workings. I knew both of them real well. They are gone now. Just the nephew is alive. He comes over here every year in August sometime. I knew them real well. I call them on the phone.

MH: Maybe I could get his address or phone number from you a little later.

CL: Sure.

MH: We noticed that there is a lot of work up there. That was all hand stacked rock.

CL: I’ll get it right now while I’m thinking about it.

MH: The McKelleget family goes back a few generations for sure.

CL: Yeah. It is a nice family. They are a great bunch of people.

MH: It is nice to know that there is still some of those families left from the area.

CL: Well, it is. I don’t know the zip on that.
MH: That’s okay.

CL: Here is the phone.

MH: Great.

CL: There you go.

MH: That’s great. That pretty much takes care of the cabins. Were there any particular characters that stand out in your memory from your days here?

CL: They were all characters. They were all characters and very interesting to visit with. I liked them all. I was a young person. I was real interested. They seemed to know that. They were just interesting to talk to.

MH: When you first came up here, what did people in this area do for fun?

CL: Nothing.

MH: Nothing? (Laughs) Did they have community dances or...?

CL: I played guitar down here in the school house a long, long time ago. We would have a little dance. Before television, they would come to that. That was the big deal: a little old school house dance. You couldn’t even get in the place. They would bring their jug of booze with them. That went on a lot then.

MH: You mentioned the booze coming in the jug. Was that made home brew?

CL: I never drank any of it. I didn’t know. I didn’t pay attention to them. I think that’s probably why I am still going strong today. I never drank any of it.

MH: A lot of folks came to these dances?

CL: We couldn’t get into the school house. You had to wiggle your way there because there would be so many people. That was the only recreation. That was before television. When television came out in the beginning of the fifties, nobody came. They were all watching TV. Nobody showed up at all. It just died like that. The TV killed all of that. That was big a deal: those little, old country dances and community dances. I would come down there to the school...

The old gymnasium they had - not the new one, the old one. Everyone used to pile in there. I played in a little dance band down there. Both of them people are gone now. They piled in...
there, if there was a dance. They would come to those little dances. That was about all there was.

The bars were still here. You could go down there and drink and step to the rhythm of the old guitar down there. Anytime you wanted to do it, they were going strong down in Alberton. That was the only thing there was.

MH: Yeah. What about... I have run into some references about Fourth of July picnics down at the lower end of the Nine Mile.

CL: Yeah, I have been to a couple of them. It was all down below that bridge down there. That is where poor people settled in here a lot. They bought properties and built houses on the properties. That was before then... Everybody would come to this Fourth of July picnic down Nine Mile Creek. They would bring their little baskets of food. That is what happened on the Fourth of July. That’s the only day that I didn’t work was the Fourth of July.

Was that crazy? Times have changed. Of course now, they don’t have them, but they do have one at the community center. They have a Fourth of July celebration there. Yeah, I haven’t been to one of them in quite a while. I think they have that every year at the community center at the Nine Mile in that old school house there.

MH: While we have the map out, do you want to show me where you had worked when you first came up here with the Beaver Dredging Company?

CL: Yeah. We were above a little creek (?) here. Where is Soldier Creek?

MH: There.

CL: There is Soldier Creek.

MH: Yeah, that is Soldier Creek.

CL: We were out in the Nine Mile in here. Where is Twin Creek? Here it is. This is one of the feeders. We worked up past that a little bit. Here is the Eustace Manivic (?) Creek coming in here. There is great gold lying underneath that on the side, off the Nine Mile Creek. It is just off the old channel in here. We worked in here.

MH: Was there much left in Martina when you were here? Was there anybody still living up there?

CL: There is some gold up there. I know where it is.

MH: But there weren’t still folks living up in cabins at that point.
CL: I don’t think any on Martina Creek itself. There is something else in there that I understand a little bit. I don’t know how good it is, but I know it would be very interesting. There would be a lot of it. It would be National Forest Service. I look in there and wonder and then decide it is too deep.

If I was younger, everything is possible. Anymore, it is just what the hell and take it easy. You don’t have to in a way. Why get yourself into something that just requires a lot of work if you don’t have to. I got a lot of work now. Not as tough as that thing up there; it is shallower and private land. There is a little advantage here.

The Forest Service has always been a great bunch of people down here. I told a bunch one time, “You’ll see the day that I’ll be up here taking over for you. Times will be so damn tough. You’ll be down here trying to get some gold so you can buy groceries.” (Laughs) It did one time. Let’s hope not. It was so crazy. I have to torment them a little bit.

MH: Yeah.

CL: (Laughs) Yeah get to think. Anyway, my last work was up here in this Soft Bed (?) country. I worked down in below here a lot. The old channel down here is where I knew the gold came out of Soft Bed. I still got a lot of work. There is money all the up to...There must be work clear up to Old Town (?). It is a big deal again. Holy cow!

I learned a little bit about this through my work over the years. It is very likely...I know it goes up here a ways. I know that. I have one claim right in here. It goes up to that road. Where is that road crossing?

MH: The road’s probably not in this map. This is an old 1920s.

CL: Okay, it ain’t on here. Anyway, the road crosses right in here somewhere. There’s a claim (?) goes up to this road. There is some more here. I know there is gold in here. I got the stuff to do it and put it back just like it is now. (Unintelligible)

Really, there is no end to the work. Once you get into a certain category, there is no end to the work here. They are killing work, but you have to make your own work. That is what I have been doing for so long.

MH: You have probably seen a lot of changes since the 1940s in mining and regulations.

CL: We never used to have any regulations. I am the one that started the reclamation deal.

MH: Henry McLernen (?) told me that. I wanted to talk to you about that.
CL: Yeah. I started that. It came to me on time just like that (snaps his fingers). It has been so easy...I have figured that out and have been doing that ever since. Of course, the mining laws were no problem for me.

MH: What made you decide to start reclaiming?

CL: I didn’t like the way things were. I was working and making a mess. It was thirty-five dollar gold. There wasn’t any extra money. The trouble was that we didn’t know. We didn’t know. When I figured it out, it came to me in a flash. Once I started that and got to it, I knew I was on the right track. It was simple.

MH: What would you do to reclaim your workings?

CL: In my work, I would use a dragline. The way I was handling the materials, I would put the old boulder (?) right back in there. I would put the top soil right on top of it as I went. It was relatively really easy. There wasn’t anything to it once you discovered how. I was glad for that. It turned out real well. The main thing was the top soil on top.

Of course, I had a big dragline. They were not toys. I can do it easy with those draglines. People don’t understand that type of equipment. But, I grew up with that. It is still the greatest material handler there is, especially for mining. I tried to get people into the thought of that. The dragline is a vast subject. It is another education. I was fortunate to grow up with that as a kid. I think when you are younger, you pick up on things a little easier. Then as you get older...

MH: Were your draglines diesel or gas power?

CL: Some of them were gasoline power way back. Diesel came out in the ‘30s. I have a gasoline power shovel now that I don’t use. It is just sitting out in the brush out there. I take parts off of it once in a while. It is really a relic. I think...When I bought it, I bought it for...It had a good boom on it and other parts. That is why I bought that. It is just sitting out back there. I have three of them out back and a cat out there that I don’t even use.

MH: That is what... When you were talking about the dragline, you prefer it for mining. Is that opposed to the backhoes and bulldozers?

CL: The dragline has more reach. That is where you can take care of top soil and set it out there quite a ways off the dragline. It is a feasible, nice machine. I grew up with that. (Unintelligible)

MH: Once you started reclaiming here on Nine Mile, did other miners follow suit? Did they realize that you had a good idea?

CL: No. they didn’t follow anything.
MH: They just didn’t want to be bothered?

CL: No, they wanted to be bothered. Evidently, it was too complicated for them.

MH: I see.

CL: It was another knowledge that they couldn’t grasp or something...I’m sure they could if they worked around me a little bit. People are strange. They want to do everything their way. I’m going to do it my mine. I am not going to do it anyway but my way! Figure that one out! You ought to be a psychologist. (Laughs)

MH: It must be really rewarding for you to look at some of these areas you have reclaimed.

CL: It is. I feel good about it. I felt good about it when I was doing it. Of course, I didn’t have any problems with Forest Service or the State. They used to bring many people up there to study the workings. The Forest Service especially would bring groups up there.

MH: This is that area of the creek that you showed me in the map?

CL: Yes. Why you can see it up there. It is right across from Beecher Creek. In here...My work in here is right across from Beecher Creek. You can see that it came out real well. The trees are all growing. It looks like there is a jungle on it. I never planted any trees. I didn’t do anything but throw a little grass seed out there in top soil. It took care of itself. That’s all I did. The state even accused me of fertilizing it. I didn’t fertilize the sucker.

It looks too good. The ground was loose. The seed took hold. It did very well in loose ground. I never did a lot of work on it. I would spread the top soil out with a cat and leave it loose as I could. It did very well. The trees even come up out of that.

MH: Wow.

CL: We all learned a little bit form that. It was nothing but a fluke. It was just a trial and error deal.

MH: But it worked.

CL: It worked. Up there near Lincoln (?), I worked a little there. I am putting the top soil back. I am saving...Not the top soil...I mean the over and back in the hole. I am saving the top soil to spread out. This is a little different situation. It is bigger, but it has turned out pretty good.

The water got a lot of...There is a settling pond there. I am reusing the water. I am just working from a trickle of water, minimal water. But what the heck! It works great.
There are a few little secrets and tricks. I reveal them to people. I don’t keep anything to myself. I try to help them. For some reason, they don’t do that. One of them is up there, but so many of them don’t do that. I don’t know why. I know one thing. They want to do it their way and they tell me that. We are going to do it the way we have planned. Well, go ahead. I don’t care what you do. I know one thing: you can’t stay in business long if you don’t do it correctly. That’s the killer for anybody that is trying to spend their money. Folks don’t spend their money. They spend somebody else’s money.

I spend my own money. I think if it’s yours, you will take more interest in it and try to perfect that a little bit. I am sure that is it. Well, what a vast subject.

MH: It is an interesting one. That was fascinating.

CL: It is. It’s probably the only real money there is. I found that out as I went through life. It is the only real money...

You have never seen the gold. I will have to show you some. I’ll show you some gold. We always have some gold. I don’t have it now. I don’t keep it now. That is spooky. But I will show you some gold and what it looks like. You can take one look at that and know it is real. It is no wonder there is a real interest in it throughout the times.

MH: One of the things that I was surprised to find out was they have an exhibit up at the museum in Helena.

CL: Yes, they do.

MH: They show gold from the different gulches and stuff.

CL: Yes.

MH: I was surprised to find out that there was such a difference in appearance in the gold flakes and dusts from the different gulches.

CL: Up there...the gold in the Nine Mile we are talking about is pure. Nothing else is in that gold. When I am walking down (unintelligible)...I don’t know what the impurity is. It runs about nine hundred fine. This one here, you’ll get nine eighty or eighty five. You get the impurity out of it. Quartz Creek was the same in fineness, but it looks different.

MH: Oh, it did.

CL: Not the grain of gold (?)... Most places it varies in finesses and purity. We learned a lot about this for years. Since ’68, the mint quit buying gold. We used to ship everything into the Denver mint. In a couple of weeks, we would get a report back and get our money. They would
tell you about the fineness of your gold and what else was in it. We had these reports so we learned about it.

Now they don’t buy anymore gold. The gold miner is now strictly on his own. It is kind of...Everybody can hold gold. So, they don’t pay any attention to you.

Anyway, there is an appearance in it. All the gold in this area around here was about a nine eighty and up to nine eighty-five fine. The gold was pure. The impurity was a little. Out of forty ounces of gold shipped to the mint, you might get an ounce of silver out of it. They would give you in a report all of what was in it. That is how we knew. Of course, we don’t get that anymore.

There are all kinds of people...right in Missoula...The refinery in Missoula that refines gold... I used to turn it over to them. A lot of people have been after me so much for gold. I just sold them the free gold. Really, you just can’t imagine the people that never knew gold from applesauce.

MH: (Laughs) You were talking about the appearance of gold. I have run into some references in history books that talk about the gold in Nine Mile being coarse and resembling the gold from Cedar Creek. What do they mean by that when they talk about appearing coarse?

CL: There are a lot of little nuggets in it.

MH: Oh, I see.

CL: A flat, nuggety gold. I’ll be right back.

MH: Okay.

CL: Excuse just a minute.

MH: You bet.

[Break in audio]

MH: I wanted to ask about why you keep looking for gold after all these years.

CL: I think you could say that it came from the time that I came from where there wasn’t any money. Times were tough. The gold is...The fascination of gold is once you are playing with it, it is real. It is a real love to all the peoples in different times.

As far back as history has been written, it has been the real wealth. This other is just so much paper and figures. We all get along with that. It is acceptable in our society today as a means of

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exchange. This gold... There is a story to this. I don’t know why when people see the gold, their eyes open up. They know it is real. There is nothing fictitious about it. I think that is it.

If I hadn’t come from terrible times, maybe I wouldn’t have paid any attention to it, but I came from where we lost everything. It wasn’t very good. There was a certain attraction to the gold from a poor farmer kid, a real attraction.

MH: Some glamour.

CL: There was something there that really attracted me. It did. My grandfather wanted to give me a big old farm and ranch. I was just a kid. He begged me to take it. Nope, I am not going to do it. I am going after the gold.

MH: So you have been a gold hunter for the most of your years.

CL: I have been interested in the mining. I studied all that I could study about it from different people and different types of operations. This had gone on for years. I am still at it. I don’t see much that really would teach me anything. Once in a while, you might learn something. That is what I am working at just to get a little better.

MH: You work mainly in the summer times. Spring, summer, fall...

CL: Yeah. I used to work all the time. I would work right through the winters. I never made any money at it, but I never lost any either. I always had a job. Now I don’t need a job. I am too lazy, I think. (Laughs) Really!

MH: You deserve a chance to take life easy for a while.

CL: I always got work if I want to do it right out in back here. I am getting lazier.

MH: Did you ever during the ‘40s and ‘50s do other excavation work besides mining?

CL: Oh, yes. I did a lot of contract work like canal work, railroad work, a lot of rift raft work on rivers.

MH: Here in Montana?

CL: Here in Montana. I have been all over the country. I started down south of Klamath Falls. I came back here in ‘64. I was down in there on canal work, big canal work. I did a lot of that. I really liked that work. Then we couldn’t get any more work, so I moved right back into the Nine Mile from Klamath Falls, Oregon.

MH: You mentioned river work here in Montana. What rivers did you...?
CL: When you turn down on both sides of Higgins Avenue Bridge in Missoula...

MH: Yeah.

CL: I did that river. I worked in there for Dennis Washington.

MH: Oh really?

CL: Yeah.

MH: When was that?

CL: It was about ‘56 or ‘57, somewhere in there. I did that river. I worked for Dennis Washington. I used to do quite a bit of work for him. Anymore, I hardly do anything. There isn’t much of that kind of work anyway. I did a lot of work for Dennis Washington. You heard that name before?

MH: Oh yeah.

CL: I know him real well. In fact, I worked for him when he was just keeping the time. He was a time keeper...Dennis was...I worked for a contractor running shovels. One day, I was on the railroad (mumbling)...I used to follow that quite a bit.

If I couldn’t get work, I would go back to this other. If I would get a good job, I would take that. When that would get through, I would go back to the gold again. This has been the story of my life. That’s how I really did it. I always have a job. That is the whole thing is having a job. You have got to have a job. That’s it right there.

MH: Keep working and keep busy.

CL: People ask me about it. They say, “How did you do it?” I say, “I’ll tell you how I did it. I put the two together.” I would start with the dragline work and some river work. All of it was dragline and maybe a cat. Mostly it was just dragline work. It was something I could do. I had no overhead. It was just me. I would do that. I had no risk. I usually was working about a month.

MH: Now would the contractor provide the dragline for you?

CL: No.

MH: You hauled your own.
CL: I had to provide the dragline. That’s why he would get me to do it. I said, “I can do it cheaper than anybody.” I load it down there and load it out. That went on for years. Anymore, why...I had a job last winter. I didn’t want to do it. It was in Butte. They called me, but I got a lot of equipment at Lincoln. The dragline is in there. I have several in there. They wanted to buy one, then decided they weren’t going to buy one and have me do it. I can’t get it out of there because the roads are too terrible.

Now I got two out here, but they require a little work. They didn’t want to do that, so I didn’t do anything. There is always little work that comes up.

MH: What did they want you to do in Butte, if I can ask?

CL: You know, I don’t know. There was a contractor that called me. I didn’t know him. He said that “Nez (?) McKinney told me that I have a machine to do this work.” I said, “Yeah.” He wanted to buy one of them, but he couldn’t buy them. “Would you do it?” I said, “I wasn’t ready. I’m not available.” I also had to do a little work on one. I’d been putzing with it. I am going to move it up to Lincoln. On the other side, I will help one of the kids over there. We are going to move it up there this summer I think unless something changes with that.

Anyway, there is no end to the work if they get to know you. They have got to know you. If they know you, then that is where they go. No end to the work.

MH: You mentioned...Are your kids into mining too?

CL: One of them is.

MH: Yeah.

CL: He is from Salem, Oregon. He has got...He owns a Willamina Tax Service in Willamina, Oregon. He goes down there every winter and works on his books. He makes a bunch of money down there through the winter. He comes up to Lincoln after that crazy gold. (Laughs)

MH: Like his dad. (Laughs)

CL: I didn’t think he would do it because it is tough, but he did. I was going to help him a little bit. He knew I had these machines out here. You have seen a little bit of the gold.

MH: This has been really interesting. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

CL: Glad to do it.

MH: We have got some tape left. Is there a chance I can hear some of your music?
CL: I will play a little bit for you.

MH: I would like that.

CL: It takes a while to get going.

MH: Okay. We will go ahead and...

CL: Anyway...

[Break in audio]

MH: Oh yeah.

CL: Why don’t you turn that off for a little while.

MH: Okay.

CL: (Sings and plays guitar)

I am out of practice. (Laughs)

MH: That was very good.

CL: There is no end to this crazy stuff like the guitar, the style, and the music. I play all kinds of it.

MH: You said you played all over in different parts of the country. You were recording?

CL: Yeah. I played in the big time a long time ago.

MH: Where at?

CL: Yeah. I did. (Guitar playing) I never went anywhere, but I still was there.

MH: (Laughs)

CL: I’ll do one more for you. This is a little Blue Grass tune called “Jimmy Brown, the Newsboy.” It is a different style. (Sings)

[End of Interview]