Oral History Number: 133-055
Interviewee: Sherill King
Interviewer: Susan Green
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Susan Green: Okay, why don't you just tell me a little bit about the kind of work that you did before you became a smokejumper? Like in the past 7 years you mentioned that you were working with the Forest Service.

Sherill King: Yeah. I worked on a suppression crew. Basically, I was just slash burning, then you go as a fire crew. I worked a season in pre-sale.

SG: What's pre-sale?

SK: Timber layout units and traverse and crews so that you can go log them. Then I got back into fire again.

SG: Why did you want to work with the Forest Service?

SK: [laughs] Because I liked being outside, being in the woods.

SG: Had you worked out in the woods before that, doing anything?

SK: Nothing quite like that.

SG: Did you have friends that worked in the Forest Service?

SK: No.

SG: How did you hear about smokejumping?

SK: I don't really remember. It's just something I remember knowing about. I don't remember where I first heard it—obviously somewhere within work.

SG: Did you know that it was open to women at that time?

SK: Yeah, yeah. In fact they had a real big push the year before, bringing women over and telling them about it, this job is here. That's when I started thinking real seriously about it and didn't do it and then the year I applied.

SG: What kind of a job did you think it was before you went?
SK: Pretty much [laughs] exactly what it was, just jumping out of planes and fighting fires. Mostly I thought it would be smaller fires than I’d been on. [laughs] I did hit some big ones, but I guess I pretty much knew what it was gonna be.

SG: What attracted you to it as different from just fighting fires on the ground? Did you expect it to be a lot different than the work you’d been doing with the Forest Service?

SK: A little different. For one thing you get to fly in, you get to parachute down and pack out. I guess I figured it’d just be maybe a little more fire, a little more. I don’t know if excitement is the word to use, but sometimes things get old after a while. Looking for something a little more challenging and different.

SG: So you'd been working for the Forest Service for 5 years or 7 years?

SK: This is my 8th year.

SG: So let’s see. The 1st year that you went into jumping then was—

SK: My 7th season, this last year.

SG: When did you begin the application process?

SK: That winter, yeah, that winter before my 7th season.

SG: Could you describe a little what the application process is?

SK: It’s just a regular Forest Service—they call it a 171. It’s a basic job description and going back for, I don’t know how long, for all your jobs and just give a description of it and write it in. They score you and decide if you’re worthy [laughs] or not to be an applicant.

SG: Then what happens next?

SK: Then they...I don't know how many of the applications are filed and they're sent to Redmond. I guess Redmond goes through them and offers jobs to those who are more qualified or those that they think would do a better job.

SG: So when did you hear that you were accepted initially?

SK: March of ’83, I think.

SG: Were there any other women that were also accepted?

SK: There were a lot of rumors, I heard that twenty-one women were offered jobs. Well that
was their big push to get women in and minorities, but mostly women. I heard 21 women were offered the jobs, seven actually showed up.

SG: You're the only one that made it, huh?

SK: Yeah.

SG: What did you have to do? Could you describe what was the test that they failed or that they didn't do very well at? Was that the PT test?

SK: For most of them it was the PT test. The 1st week to 2 weeks of training is pretty physically rough. They do PT's twice a day, that's an hour and they run you and then they exercise you. Some of them decided that that was more work than they wanted to go through. Some of them couldn't do the physical requirements, and that's 25 pushups, 45 sit-ups, 7 pull-ups, a mile and a half run and your 3-mile packout. One lady who was real good got hurt in one of the packouts, sprained her ankle and couldn't finish training, so she didn't make it. The rest just weren't in shape or just decided it was more work than they wanted to put out.

SG: It was more work than they had anticipated it being?

SK: I guess.

SG: Did you talk with them at all? Did they do any pre-training?

SK: One of them I did. I don't know if she did any pre-training or not. Some of them had done some. I think the pull ups was a real hard thing for a lot of the women. It still is for me. The packout is a real hard thing for a lot of the women.

SG: So when you first arrived there, do you do the PT test right away?

SK: First day you do everything but your packout. Then we did our packout the 2nd day. Then we did another packout, lighter pack but a cross-country packout, either later that week or the 2nd week, I can't remember. We lost some people there, men and women.

SG: Do you remember how many men were at training?

SK: We started out with 39 rookies, I think. Seven of those were women, so there was 32 men. We ended up with 17 or 18 that made it through it.

SG: So a lot of people wash out? They don't last?

SK: Yeah.
SG: When you say the packout, is that part of an all-night dig or anything that? In the old days they used to do an all-night dig followed by the packout.

SK: Yeah, no, it wasn’t for us. It was...just first thing in the morning, 3 miles there and back.

SG: What kind of terrain?

SK: Well, for our test, we did it on the road which is actually maybe a little harder because the asphalt was real hard on people’s feet with the pack. Then our cross-country packout was...It was where there had been a fire the year before and it was a 4-and-a-half-mile packout. They had a route set up that you flagged in, and you just followed that, up and down some hills, and some flat and kinda rolling. That wasn’t real bad.

SG: So there were two?

SK: Yeah, two packouts, and the one was lighter. One I was, I think, 85 or 95 pounds, and one was 110.

SG: That was the 1st week?

SK: Yeah. I can't remember the second packout might have been the 2nd week and then PT's twice a day for 2 weeks, 4 weeks? Two weeks, I guess.

SG: How long was your whole training process?

SK: A month.

SG: A month. The 1st week was it mostly just testing?

SK: The 1st day was testing. The 2nd day was the packout test. Then we started learning letdowns and going off the tower and suit ups and on into that, it seemed like all day long. [laughs] Eventually we started getting into a little bit of fire behavior, some basic air ops [operations], a little bit of classroom stuff. I think it was the 2nd couple of weeks we started getting into, well the 3rd week we started getting into jumping, actually jumping and tree climbing. I think that was most of the time.

SG: The training facilities were pretty much designed for men. Was that any problem for you to work with the equipment, being too small, being not quite suited up to the suits? Did you discover any problems with that at all?

SK: The only problem I had was, when you go off the tower and you go down the cables there was a little mound with a ramp that you land on. I'm a little short. [laughs] On one side, the cable is a little higher or the mound is a little shorter. Sometimes you go past it and you're kinda
left hanging in the air [laughs] until the cable slacks up a little bit. There's a couple times when you just can't quite touch the ground or you just get one foot on the ground. Other than that, no. Sometimes a couple of the guys missed on it too. But yeah, there's really no problem.

SG: How was it training with—you said there were six other women?

SK: Yeah.

SG: Six other women and thirty-nine men to begin with?

SK: No, 32 men.

SG: Thirty-two men. How was it to train with those people?

SK: I don't know. It was not bad. I kept to myself quite a bit and made few friends right at first. The ranks thinned down pretty fast, [laughs] so a lot of people I don't really remember seeing much of.

SG: How long did it take them to get pretty thin? Like when did the bulk of people leave?

SK: By the first 2 weeks, I think we only lost one person after the first 2 weeks. We lost most, about half, I think we lost about half the 1st week and the other half the 2nd week.

SG: Were the reasons that the men left similar to the reasons that the women left? Did they talk much about?

SK: I didn't really talk to anybody that much. I lived off base and didn't live in the dorms so I didn't really see a lot of people.

SG: Oh, you didn't have to live in the dorms?

SK: NO. Some of them, it was I think more work than they were ready for, and some of them got hurt. A couple guys got heat exhaustion. Some of them just physical and mentally couldn't handle it.

SG: Did any of those people try out again, do you know? Did they come back the next year?

SK: Not here. I know some of them said they were going to. I don't know whether they ended up trying out at other bases or not.

SG: Did you feel like the training was much fun?

SK: No. [laughs] I wouldn't want to do it again. It wasn't real easy.
SG: Is that something you have to do every year when you go back?

SK: No. [laughs] Rookie training is real hard, I think. It's not as hard as it used to be, I know that. It wasn't as hard as I expected it to be. I expected a lot more harassment just because it used to be that way. They were real easy on us for obvious reasons I guess, EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] and stuff like that.

SG: When you say they were real easy on you, what do you mean?

SK: Well, like harassment. Rookies always get a hard time; the rookies are the bottom of the list. I just expected a lot more harassment from people, just from the old men. Not me in particular but just as rookies. You know, that's the way it's always been.

SG: Oh, so you'd heard about that before you'd even got there?

SK: Yeah.

SG: What had you heard about the previous training that you thought it was so hard? What had you thought it was gonna be like?

SK: Well, I knew that they did a lot of...I knew that you had to be in shape. I guess I really didn’t know quite what to expect. I wasn’t in good enough shape. [laughs] Some of the guys were pretty sore, I think everybody was real sore by the end of the 1st week. I don't know.

SG: Did you have any kind of program of training during the winter? Did you do anything special to get ready for the training?

SK: No. [laughs] I started running and tried to keep that up because I’m not a real good runner; I’m pretty slow. Other than that, I didn’t do a lot. Once I got to work, we’d do PT’s in the morning at work, and I worked on that, trying to just build up there. But I didn’t really do anything extra special other than run.

SG: Had you been working during the winter?

SK: I can’t remember. Not with the Forest Service, just did some skiing and stuff like that, lotta cutting wood [laughs], so I wasn't completely out of shape. I wasn't working out or anything.

SG: So your training lasted about 4 weeks?

SK: Yeah.

SG: Were you glad when it was over?
SK: Yeah.

SG: Did you have a celebration?

SK: We all went out for beers. [laughs] All the rookies got together.

SG: Do the rookies get pretty tight during that session—during that 4 weeks?

SK: Yeah, they do. It’s real good. The old men enforce that too. It’s help your rookie brother.

SG: How does that work?

SK: I think it's a pretty good thing. You need the reinforcement from the people that you're working with. It helps draw you close together. That reinforcement is what helps you get through the program.

SG: Help your rookie brother. Is that something goes on during training or is that after training?

SK: I think it kinda works both ways the 1st year, it's during training. When somebody's tagging along in the rear, it's, you know, give them some encouragement. When you're out there doing PT's and somebody's not doing them either the whole group ends up starting them all over again or yo do twice as many as they originally thought or we're doing them all day, or whatever. It's encourage each other and try and support each other. It really does help build a good closeness within the group.

SG: So that harassment doesn’t really…doesn’t exist much? Is it just a different kind?

SK: Oh, it's there. It's from the old men that you get harassed. It's not real bad, it was really definitely not bad for my rookie year. It wasn't too bad this year. It's just little things. It's kinda, I'm sure, like frats and sororities through their harassment and things like that. It's not real bad, it's definitely wasn't the harassment I expected to get.

SG: So things worked out a little better than you'd hoped?

SK: Yeah. It's just things like, you're doing leg lifts and I remember one of the old men walked down into the units and our legs were up in the air. They just all started talking, meanwhile we're still sitting there supposedly holding our legs in the air. They're just bullshitting with each other. I just knew that that's why they were doing' it. It was just one of those little things. People were going come on, come on. I just kinda laughed to myself and thought, this is part of it. They glass taped up and hosed us down, that's part of rookie initiation. It's nothing real bad.

SG: So that rookie initiation, does that go on the whole season?
SK: No, but you’re always a rookie. [laughs] You get the rookie jobs and the less desirable jobs. That’s what it takes to be a rookie.

SG: What’s a rookie job?

SK: Bull cooking.

SG: Bull cooking.

SK: Sweeping the floors, mopping, cleaning the bathrooms, pulling weeds on the runway, whatever it takes, hauling rocks.

SG: Who decides what jobs, who gets what?

SK: I think the squad leaders do.

SG: How many squad leaders were there for your rookie class?

SK: Six or seven.

SG: Did they keep the same rookies, or did they each have assigned rookies? Did they switch around?

SK: No. You go wherever the job takes you. Some people are in charge of the loft, some are in charge of cargo, some are in charge of sewing.

SG: These are all things you did after training?

SK: Yeah.

SG: After, like when you were n t on fire?

SK: Yeah.

SG: Getting back to that 3rd week of training, you said you started jumping?

SK: Yeah.

SG: Do you remember where your first training jump was?

SG: Do you remember where your first training jump was?
SK: Glaze Meadows, it's a real big meadow out by Black Bear.

SG: How was that first jump?

SK: Real nice. It was great.

SG: Was it a nice day?

SK: Yeah, it was sunny. It was windy, but it's a real big meadow. It was a great feeling just getting out of the plane and it was real quiet. It just seemed like I was in the air for a long time.

SG: You said before you didn’t get very nervous at all. Were you nervous even in the plane?

SK: No, I was real calm. I felt real good about it. In fact, four of us had gone up—well, they jumped, trying to jump everybody. Four of us went up and it got too windy and we couldn't jump so they turned us back and we had to do it again. It was everybody else's second jump, but we had a real good time. We were all disappointed to go back. It was a good feeling. I wanted to do it again. [laughter]

SG: How long do you think you were in the air before you came down?

SK: A minute and a half, maybe 2 minutes, maybe not even that long.

SG: A lot of people talk about the quiet.

SK: Yeah, that was the first thing I noticed because the plane is real noisy. There’s no door or anything. It’s just an immediate quiet.

SG: When do you start thinking about hitting the ground?

SK: [laughing] Oh, probably too high up. You look at it and it seems to come closer and closer. You're not supposed to look at it because if you do, you'll land wrong and go feet to face. So you wanna kinda look up. It's kinda like, oh no, when am I gonna hit! Oh, here goes! It's not as bad as I thought it was gonna be.

SG: How was your first landing?

SK: Oh [laughing], feet to face. It took me a little while to figure it out [laughing] for a few jumps. But it was fun, it wasn't bad.

SG: How many practice jumps did you get to do?

SK: We did eight on an FS-10. Oh excuse me, four on a 10 and four on a 12. Then we got in a
couple more. So I think we had ten practice jumps all together.

SG: Did you feel like you were pretty well trained to do the jumps?

SK: Well, I thought so, but I didn't know much then. Yeah, actually we were. We were jumping into some smaller spots and got into some littler areas where you had to think a little bit and do a little bit of manipulating.

SG: Did you have any rough landings, real rough ones?

SK: I hit a tree, [laughing] got caught up pretty high. That wasn't real soft and a couple of hard landings just from doing it wrong.

SG: How was getting out of that tree?

SK: Getting out was easy. It was going after my chute that was a little harder. It took me a long time. [laughs] I was up there a ways. I had to cut a lot of the tree out to get my chute out.

SG: It sounds like you had enough practice jumps, anyway. That's really good you got ten jumps.

SK: Yeah.

SG: Do you remember how long after that was your first fire jump?

SK: I think it was just a little over a month, 6 weeks or so. I went on a few pounders before then, but no jumps.

SG: Let's see, it was 6 weeks until you did your first jump. How many fires had you been on before you jumped?

SK: Must have been two or three.

SG: Were people kinda disappointed to not be able to go out and jump?

SK: I was. Most of the other guys got some jumps in. There was only two or three I think that their first fire jump was the same time mine was and we'd all be on a lot of pounders. Not a lot but we'd been catching the pounders and missing the jumps.

SG: How'd you feel about that?

SK: It was real depressing, that's the way the list went.

SG: So how many people were on the list at that time?
SK: I think we had about 55.

SG: Were they going through the list pretty quickly that year?

SK: It was kind of a slow year. It went a lot faster this year, there were a few less people this year too so that helps.

SG: A few less people.

SK: Yeah, I think we only had about 43 actually on the list this year.

SG: Do you know if that was because of budget cuts? Do you know why that was, just not enough people to pass the test?

SK: They’re trying to cut numbers. They might even cut down more; it’s kind of up in the air right now. It sounds like they need to cut about ten more people, but that may or may not happen.

SG: Hopefully not.

SK: Yeah, small bases are nice, but if you get too small, you lose a lot of mobility. You lose some people to Montana. Some people went last year and went the year before and usually always end going to California, up to Washington. If you don't have enough people, you kinda lose out on things like that, because you need enough people to cover your base. Otherwise you have to pull off of another base to come and cover yours while you're all gone.

SG: So there's always a certain number that they keep right at the base?

SK: Well, actually not always. If things are really happening...We've sent all of our people off and then pulled in people from Idaho to come and cover our base. But they kind of like to try and keep people around. I think sometimes they had, I'm not real sure of all the politics on it.

SG: Do you remember where your first fire jump was?

SK: It was on the Ochoco Ranger District. It was a little depressing because they all ready had bunches of people there and cats and a helicopter. But they dropped a plane load, six of us dropped and it was great. It was my first fire jump finally. I had a little meadow to jump in, that was all real nice. But it was kind of depressing in a way because there were already so many people there. There were tankers. [laughs]

SG: Is that kind of unusual to have so many people there when you jump?
SK: Yeah, for that small of a fire.

SG: Why'd they jump you?

SK: Well, I'm not real sure. We kinda thought maybe, we ended up spending the night and everybody else went home and thought that might be part of the reason. I don't know what they did with all those people. I don't know what they were doing. We went and dug most of the line and mopping up all night then they brought the people back the next day.

SG: So you were kind of like a relief crew almost.

SK: Oh, I don't know. We were there all afternoon and into the evening. I really don't know why we jumped. It was up to the fire boss, he wanted us so we jumped.

SG: You said there were other people there when you got there. Did you work with them when you were there, or did they leave when you came?

SK: No, they stayed, but we worked just as our own little crew of jumpers and they worked as their own crews. We took one side and did our work there, and they had other things that they did. We never actually combined forces.

SG: Did you have any interaction with them at all, aside from doing your own little projects, kind of working on the fires separately. Do you get to talk with them at all?

SK: You can. We had our own little jobs, and we're in a different area. So we really didn't see a lot of them.

SG: After you jump, is it pretty structured as to what you have to do then?

SK: Yeah, it's the same thing. Go in, size up your fire, put your line around it, start your mop up, same as any other fire.

SG: So it's pretty basic to what you do when you're working in the Forest Service, not necessarily as a smokejumper, but those skills are things that you've had in the past.

SK: Yeah.

SG: Do you find that the smokejumpers work together in the same way that the suppression crew did?

SK: Yeah, but there's a difference. You work together, but you're also a lot more of an individual. The crews I worked on it seems like there was always a crew boss or somebody in charge which is the same when you go as jumpers. When you get there, depending on the fire,
but on a lot of them everybody knows what to do and they just start doing it. There's your basic structure to follow, but it's not finely structured like on a big crew whereas the crew boss says you and you and you go do this. You're a lot more independent, you're a lot more your own person. You know what the other people can and can't do. You just expect them to go out and do it. Somebody doesn't have to be standing there telling you what to do all the time or feel that they have to stand there telling you what to do all the time like on a district crew or on another larger crew. I like that a lot.

SG: It seems like it would be a lot nicer of an experience to work that way. How do you find out what people can do, just by working with them?

SK: Just by working with them. Pretty much everybody knows their basic fire. Some people are a lot better with saws than others. Some people'd rather run a saw than others. Some people know a little more, the few times that you do, are using pumps and hose and water, some people know more about that than others, depending on where you've worked before. Jumpers, it seems like you don't use hose and water a lot.

SG: Why do you think that is?

SK: Probably mostly because you’re just in places where there isn’t any. If you jump in either a real big fire, and you’re not there for a real long time, or you jump on a little one out in the sticks, where there aren't many roads, so there's no way to get one there. It's usually just dry mopping.

SG: What do you think about using a pulaski?

SK: I like it better than a shovel. [laughs]

SG: I've heard they're thinking that pulaskis are possibly not weighted right for women. What do you think about that?

SK: I've never noticed that, I don't know.

SG: You've never had any problems with it.

SK: I guess I've never had a problem with it.

SG: They were thinking of just different innovations presumably to encourage more women to become jumpers.

SK: I've never heard that.

SG: Who is the person in charge who is kind of the replacement for the crew boss when you're
out on a fire?

SK: Unless it's a rookie, the first person out the door of the plane is the fire boss. He runs the crew if there's all ready people there. Once in a while they'll change that depending on the fire. If it's a real big and going fire, somebody with maybe a little more experience they'll give it to. That doesn't happen too often. If you go as a ground crew, one of the squad leaders is fire boss.

SG: That must be nice to be able to be so independent when you're all working.

SK: Yeah, it is.

SG: As a rookie, did you expect that independence? Had you heard about it?

SK: No, I guess I really didn't, but I enjoyed it. That's one of the, I think, the most appealing things about the job. It's a lot more independent. I like that aspect.

SG: Have you given any thought to why you think that is, why there is such independence?

SK: Probably because you work with a lot smaller group of people. It seems like most of the guys there have been there for quite a long time and are a real tight knit bunch of people. If you can't rely on the person you're with on a smaller fire with two, four or six people, then maybe they shouldn't be out there. So hopefully your jump partner knows what he's doing and you don't have to look out for him all the time. He doesn't have to look out for you all the time. So you just both go and, I guess, maybe just go and know that they know what they're doing and you can trust them.

SG: Is there a high degree of trust when you're jumping, like especially in your rookie year, a lot of things are new?

SK: Boy. I think sometimes people kind of tend to maybe out for the watch rookies a little more, especially in the jumps—make sure that they know what's going on. It seems like a lot of people are coming in with a lot of fire experience. So they should pretty much know what's going on on the ground, other than jumpwise.

SG: Do you feel like you got any preferential treatment as a woman?

SK: As a woman rookie?

SG: Mm hmm.

SK: I don't think so.

SG: Did the rookies ever talk among themselves about being rookies?
SK: Yeah, there were the jokes—and just another dumb rook. [laughs] We laughed about it and made jokes about the old men.

SG: How was it your 2nd year when you came back, and you weren’t a rookie anymore?

SK: Well, you’re still a 2nd-year rookie. [laughs] But you’re not a rookie. Some people don’t deal with rookies at all. It’s just the way things go and they are. Once you’re not a rookie, some people will talk to you or have more to do with you than if you are a rookie. That’s just part of being a rookie.

SG: What determines what makes you more accepted in the jumpers?

SK: As to what?

SG: As to, you just said some people won’t talk to you even when you're a 2nd-year rookie. When is the point, when do you stop being a rookie?

SK: Never. [laughs] It’s just some people’s…I don’t know, maybe they’ve just been around so long; it’s always been that way. Rookies are the bottom of the barrel. You’re there to be given a hard time to.

SG: How many years are you gonna have to work until you think you won’t be a rookie anymore?

SK: Well, I’m not near as much of a rookie this year. People will joke and say you're just a 2nd-year rook, but probably 3rd year [laughs], you quit being a rookie, or even a 2nd-year rookie. You’re a lot more accepted I think, in your 2nd year, because you’ve been through one. I still don’t know a lot and there's still a lot to learn. I think you really do have a lot to learn.

SG: Your position as a rookie’s a lot different than, I think, some of the other men rookies because you are the only woman at Redmond and the only woman rookie the 1st year and the only 2nd-year rookie who is a woman the 2nd year. It seems like that could be a hard situation.

SK: Yeah.

SG: It seems like, from what you’ve said, that people seem to treat you more as a rookie than looking at you as a woman. I don't know if that's true or not.

SK: They don’t treat me more as a rookie, just more as something different. They watch what you do a lot, I think a lot more so last year. I remember on my first fire, we got there in the afternoon and dug line all night. The next morning we hiked out to catch a helicopter ride out. One of the guys walked up to me and said, I was kinda by myself, he said "You did good." I just thought, oh great, I did good. Then I thought bullshit, what do these guys expect? What do you
mean, I did good? You know, they don't know what to expect from you and they don't know what to expect from women. They've, I'm sure, had a lot of hard times with women who don't maybe pull their own weight. There was a real big push to get women in and they took that kind of hard. There are some real good reasons for that. [Pause] I forgot what I was talking about now.

SG: What good reasons for women not being in there.

SK: Can't think anymore.

SG: I flip out occasionally too.

SK: Lost my whole train of thought.

SG: We were just talking about how it is for women and during those first couple of years being a rookie. You were just talking about how one of the fellows had said after a fire that you did good.

SK: Well, you're certainly on display a lot. People are watching what you do, more so than the guys, than what the other guys are doing I should say.

SG: Do they complement each other?

SK: Not really, I guess. I mean if you mean actual compliments like hey you did—not really.

SG: You said that there were some why they'd had a problem with women. What kind of a problem had they had? Had they had any women jumpers working on the base before?

SK: No, but I guess they offered jobs, when I was hired to 21 women and some of the guys that had jumped, they weren't gonna hire back. There were I guess, a few complications with that, but a lot of the reason was because they needed to pick up women and minorities. So some of the white males that had been there weren't offered jobs again and that caused a lot of hard feelings. I think it caused a lot of hard feelings, I think because they offered jobs to so many women and so few actually showed up. They didn't make it. Some of them honestly shouldn't have even showed up to begin with. I mean I wasn't in the greatest of physical shape but some of those ladies should never have even bothered to come. That did cause some hard feelings. They were told not, I think they were given the lecture on not causing trouble and not saying things to us in general because they didn't want people calling harassment for being a woman or a minority. There was some real strong feelings from people in charge, not just at the base but people above them. I think people were afraid, you know.

They didn't want women, I keep saying women, mostly I say women, but I guess I mean women and minorities, to say these people are harassing me and I wanna file an EEO complaint or
whatever. I think there's still a lot of fear. In fact, I know there's still a lot of fear that somebody might say something to me and I'm gonna do something about it. They're afraid, some of the guys, to tease me, like they tease each other, and say things to me like they'll say to each other, because they don't know what I'm gonna do, how I'm gonna take it. They're afraid that I'm, and I have a hard time understanding that, they're afraid I'm gonna go running to somebody and cry on somebody's shoulder and make something out of it.

SG: Has anything happened that would give them any kind of justifications for feeling that way?

SK: No, no. I've never had problems with any of the guys. I've never come down on any of them for saying anything to me. I think I joke about myself as much as they do. They do more.

SG: Can you tease them?

SK: Some, yeah. There's dumb girl jokes, I'm the dumb girl and that's fine. You know, I'll joke with them right along with that. That doesn't bother me. I can joke with them a little bit, some of them more than others. [laughing] Some of them joke with me more than others. I'm not sure what their fear is or where it came from. I'm sure a lot of them have never really worked with women, just because they've been jumpers for so long.

SG: Some of them are afraid to talk to you.

SK: It seems like. In talking with some other people, it sounds like some of the guys, they really don't know how to deal with me and how I'll react to things. They're afraid I'll react in the wrong way.

SG: I wonder what kind of lecture they were given about the EEO. That would be interesting.

SK: I don't know. Yeah, I don't know exactly what was said, but I think that they were told to be a little milder and not say things. I know we didn't have a real rookie initiation like the class before us had and other people have had.

SG: What do they do for the rookie initiation?

[Break in audio]

SG: We were talking about what they do for the rookie initiation. Okay, you were saying that they blindfold people?

SK: Yeah. There's a lower level on the tower that's, I think, 3 or 4 feet high. In some years past they've blindfolded people and put a big fold-a-tank out there. It's like a 15,000-gallon square swimming pool and tell them to jump off and do a roll blindfolded. You blindfold them with their hands taped in front of them and they don't know that there's this tank of water in front
of them. They do things like that. I think they take them out and get them drunk. You know, there's just things that they do. All they did to us was glass tape us and hose us down, really mild, real mild.

SG: Were the men rookies surprised that the initiation was so mild?

SK: No, because they knew better. I mean, they didn't do it much less, and there was a reason for it. There again, if something happens and if somebody gets mad or doesn't like it, they can turn it into something. You're giving us a hard time. You're giving me a hard time because I'm a woman. Knock it off.

SG: It seems like there might be a little tension around that.

SK: I think there is. I've never actually hit on it, but I think there is some tension. I'm not sure where it's all coming from. I think part of it is some of the upper overhead.

SG: They're telling everybody to behave.

SK: Yeah.

SG: Did they give you any kind of a supportive lecture, anything like that? Were you ever kind of taken aside from the other people and talked to?

SK: No. There was a big general lecture where...everybody was in there together. There was a line in there something to the effect that, I can't remember exactly what it was, if anybody gets to be overly pushy or troublesome to the rookies that they're gonna go and go right through rookie training with all the rookies. I don't know. People just don't know how to take women.

SG: I think so.

SK: I think they're real scared and real cautious.

SG: Well, you said before there was good reason for that.

SK: There is some good reason for it, just with what happened with the hiring. That made people not real receptive to having women come into the program. I don't know if there's a reason for them to be afraid to say and do things. Maybe it's just as far as I'm concerned, maybe the other women don't feel that way or would feel differently. I can't help but thinking that a woman who has been on fire long enough to wanna jump and make it through that program would care. I don't know. You learn to deal with a lot, the jokes and the comments. You just learn to ignore them or say something.

SG: So you don't feel particularly tense when you're working?
SK: No.

SG: What about when they picked those 21 women? How did they decide who to pick?

SK: All I know is you had to have a season in fire. Other than that, I don’t know how they picked them. That’s the only requirement I can really think of right now.

SG: Seems like a lot of the women they picked didn’t really understand what they were expected to be doing when they got there?

SK: Well, when they sent the announcement out for the job, it said right on it these are the physical requirements that you're gonna have to pass. So people knew what they would have to do. Like I said, only seven of them did show up and some of them shouldn't have shown up. Maybe I shouldn't of shown up but I made it.

SG: Well, obviously you did pretty well. All the other women, had they had as much fire experience as you had?

SK: I don't think all of them had. I know one lady had quite a bit. The rest, I'm not real sure how much they had.

SG: In this particular area, do you know of any other woman who had more seasons on fire crew, on suppression crew?

SK: No.

SG: Well, you've got quite a status around here at Redmond, [laughs] most seasons on a suppression crew, only woman smokejumper. Are people in the community aware of that?

SK: Some of them are, some of them aren't. You know it never mattered how long I'd been working with fire to most of the people I know. I think most of the people never thought about it. I think people that I don't know too well don't know and don't care. There are people who I work with who have been there just as long as me so it's not really any big thing. It's been around for a long time.

SG: What did your friends think when you decided to become a smokejumper?

SK: Why do you wanna jump out of a perfectly good airplane? [laughs]

SG: I've heard that comment before.

SK: Yeah, many times.
SG: Why do you want to jump out of a perfectly good airplane? That’s a good question.

SK: I like it. It's a good feeling.

SG: Did it take your friends a long time to get used to you wanting to be a jumper?

SK: No, I had a lot of support from them. One of the guys helped me write up my application. I had some good support from my friends going through rookie training. There were some times when I was a little worried. I could call friends and get some good support from them.

SG: What about your relatives and your family?

SK: My dad just told me to be careful and took it real well, he's worked in the woods. My mom didn't seem to take it too hard, she never really said anything. They're about the only ones I ever talked to about it.

SG: So they don't think it's a problem that you wanted to be a smokejumper or working in the Forest Service?

SK: No.

SG: So that’s good. It seems like you’re getting a lot of support.

SK: Yeah.

SG: What about when you bring it up to people? Can you think of any encounters you've had when anyone asked you what you did and had to describe to them what you do?

SK: They don't understand. They don't understand smokejumping at all. They don't understand fighting fire. It's a real hard thing for them to try and understand it, if they've never worked in the woods or been out and know anything about it. I think you're just kind of running into a dead-end wall, because they don't understand it, and a lot of them really don't care so much, and can't relate to it at all. Some of them just said I don't wanna hear about it. They think it's real dangerous. I guess it can be. Don't tell me. I don't wanna hear. Okay.

SG: Are there lots of injuries?

SK: No. I can think of only two in the 8 years I've been with the Forest Service, on the suppression crew. A couple of people got injured last summer jumping, but it wasn't real bad. This guy had a couple of broken bones in his foot and one guy bruised his heel. They sent up people from California, I guess, got hurt a little bit. But nothing real bad.

SG: So when people talk to you about the danger and the risk, do you feel that it's justified? Do
they see more of a danger than you see?

SK: I think other people that don't really know about the job do. It depends on who you're working with, how long you've been working with them to know what to expect from them. That's, I think, partly where jumping maybe is a more independent thing because people trust each other more. They see the danger, but they know it and they deal with it better. They know enough to trust each other. They don't maybe take it as seriously. Maybe that's not the right word, it's not the right word, but I guess the trust level's higher maybe.

SG: I wonder what builds that trust level to be so high among the jumpers, that bonding? Do you think it happens during the training?

SK: Among the rookie class, I think the rookie classes form a bond just maybe being with each other so much.

SG: Did you get a lot of overtime when you worked?

SK: A fair bit.

SG: What about the 2nd year?

SK: A lot more. [laughs]

SG: Do things change a lot like when you spend...you just talked about spending a lot of time with the jumpers, but like on an overtime or on a big fire where you're with them constantly, do things ever get tense there? Will they talk up to you more? What's your longest time that you've been on a fire when you were jumping?

SK: Three days I think.

SG: And during that 3-day period, do you find that the guys still maintain that maybe not talking to you stuff?

SK: I think when there's, boy, it's pretty much the same whether it's at the base or on a fire. If it's a small fire and there's only a few of you, they'll talk to you a little bit more. You're thrown together a lot more and there's not as many people definitely. The need to talk is there to get the work done. Friendships, or I guess you could call them friendships, build up a little more just because you're the only two, or few, people there. It's still not real open. Probably a lot of that's me.

SG: Is there talking when you're digging line and things, when you're working on a fire?

SK: Yeah.
SG: What kinds of things do people talk about?

SK: Oh boy, anything and everything.

SG: Do they talk about the fire, or do they talk about other things?

SK: It depends on the fire. Sometimes people talk about the fire. Sometimes they just joke back and forth. What'd you do the other night or tell jokes or give each other a hard time about the girl they took out. It depends on the fire, if you're really working real hard, obviously talking is less. On the smaller ones, you have a little more time to, you know, this is what we're gonna do and this and this and this and this and you just start talking about general things.

SG: Do the jumpers spend time together a lot outside, off base, like when they're not working, doing project work or jumping?

SK: Some of them are real good friends, it seems like we do do a few things together, organized baseball games and soccer and go out and drink. It seems like there's a lot of kegs. People'll get kegs for this or that or making their 50th jump, 100th jump, 150th jump, you buy a keg. There's a few other things that people end up having to buy kegs for. So there's usually a few parties throughout the year. They probably get together as a group more than district people, and as individuals, probably like anybody else, you get together with your friends.

SG: It seems like a lot of the social occasions kinda get organized around kegs and beer.

SK: Oh yeah. [laughs]

SG: You drink a lot of beer?

SK: Yeah, we do. We can spill a lot of beer.

SG: So, do they ever go into town to go drinking or do they just kind of have little parties at their houses?

SK: No. There's a couple of bars that people go to a lot, get together after work and go down and drink.

SG: Do they have a good reputation in the bars?

SK: Yeah, they do.

SG: Must be hard to get up the next day and go on a fire.
SK: Yeah. [laughs] I try not to stay too late and drink too much. There’s always people talking and joking about you have to sacrifice to make that fire. If you don’t sacrifice, you’re not gonna go. [laughs]

SG: Are you on call on your days off?

SK: NO, not really because they have so many people. They stagger. Half the crew’s off a couple of days, and the other half is off different days. So the base is usually real well covered unless a whole bunch of people jump or are sent off somewhere to another base. Then they’ll put a few people on.

SG: So let’s see. You were working' on that base from June until—

SK: June until the end of September.

SG: Do you wind up keeping in touch with any of the jumpers? Do you tend to see jumpers in the off season?

SK: I don't because none of them live around here. I see a few of them work at Bachelor Ski Resort. Sometimes when I go over there, I see a few of them there.

SG: I'm curious to know if Forest Service people tend to hang out together.

SK: Yeah. Well, up here they do because there's a lot of us in the Forest Service and retired. That's about all there is here. Most of your friends work for the Forest Service. You hang out with them. [laughs]

SG: So how long do you think you'll be a smokejumper?

SK: Right now I'm hoping to jump for at least 2 more years and see what happens after that.

SG: Do you have any kinda career goals of any sort?

SK: No. I don't know right now, I'm not real sure. I think I'll stay in fire and see what happens with jumping, and whether I wanna make that a career, if that's at all possible, or get back into fire and fuels from a district point of view.

SG: So you do have several different ways to go.

SK: Several options, yeah.

SG: How could you make jumping a career?
SK: You’d have to probably get into one of the squad leader positions and stay with that for a while, eventually, probably get out because you’d only be able to jump for so long, before you can’t, oh I don’t know, some people jump for an awful long time.

SG: When you talk about getting up to being a squad leader, how does it go—the pecking order? You’re a jumper, and then where can you go next.

SK: You get to be a squad leader. Then you can go to one of the foreman jobs as the training foreman, a loft foreman. You can get into base manager.

SG: Is there a way to get experience to do that? Can you kinda work toward being a squad leader or is that something that just happens to you?

SK: Well, you put in your time. If you’re any good at it and there’s an opening. I’m not sure how they choose them, to tell you the truth. I haven’t been around long enough to know.

SG: What about being a spotter?

SK: Oh, those are squad leaders. That’d be a nice thing to learn.

SG: So it seems to be that you just get a certain amount of experience and they decide if they know that you want to be a squad leader.

SK: Yeah, the experience and if you’re good at it—what your potential is.

SG: Do you feel like the squad leaders that you’ve seen and the foreman are, how can I say it, fairly good leaders? Do they do their positions in ways that make you respect them, that make you feel confident that they know what they’re doing.

SK: Yeah, yeah. Almost all of them. I’ve got a lot of respect for them. I think they really know what they’re doing.

SG: Have they all been jumpers?

SK: Yeah, they all still jump. It’s just a little more authority.

SG: So every year they also have to take that test?

SK: Yeah.

SG: What’s the highest position you could go up into in the jumpers?

SK: I guess that’d be the base manager, which is Bill Moody and Tom Delong. I don’t know who
the other guys are. Some of them still jump, and some of the don’t.

SG: That’d be certainly a first—the first woman [base manager].

SK: Yes. I don’t know if I can ever be that.

SG: You know, it’s interesting. If they called up 21 women to get in there, and only seven showed up to even take the test and only one made it, do you know what their EEO quota is? Are they supposed to have a certain number of women working there?

SK: I think the fire organization in general, and I can’t remember for sure, but they’re trying to get 45 percent women. I think that’s outrageous; they’re never gonna get it. There’s not enough women that are ever even gonna wanna do the job.

SG: What kind of advice would you give to a woman who was considering it? What kind of experience would she need? What could she do to prepare herself for it? What kind of mental attitude would she need to have? If I was sitting here saying I’d like to be a smokejumper, what would you tell me? What would I have to do? What would I have to be like?

SK: I think the more fire experience you have, the better off you are. I think you need more than one season, because you’re gonna be looked at a lot more than the guys. You really do need to know what you’re doing. Physically, probably the hardest things are gonna be the pullups and packout so upper body—arms, some of your back muscles. I think a sense of humor is a must. I think you need to be able to take a little flack. You need to be able to give it back. I don’t know what it’ll be like or what it’s like to have more than one woman. I know until I made my first jump I got a lot of good-natured flack for 6 weeks about jumping. That was right when Sally Ride was making her big debut, and a lot of Sally Ride jokes. Try and take it well. If you can’t take it, tell them. [laughs] Boy, just be ready for that rookie training because it’s gonna be hard.

SG: It seems like it’s important to be real honest, like you just said if you can’t take it to tell them?

SK: Mm hmm. When you’re tired of it—

SG: Just be real up front.

SK: Shut up. I’m not in the mood. I don’t wanna hear it anymore.

SG: You were talking about how the rumors and the gossip, this great networking, is that a way that people kinda communicate to each other? You said there’s a lot of talking when you’re working fire depending on the fire, but people seem to remain real private. A lot too, it seems to be that they get to a certain point then they kind of take their own space.
SK: Well, I do. I don't know the other guys do it so much.

SG: But this rumor thing, what kinds of things do you get on the rumor hotline? You don't have to name anything personal.

SK: Oh boy. [laughs] Just about anything. I think I'm on the rumor hotline an awful lot.

SG: Do they have a nickname for you?

SK: Dumb girl.

SG: How do you feel about that?

SK: Oh, that's all right.

SK: Just the girl and the dumb girl are the only ones that they say to my face. That doesn't bother me because the people who say it, say it jokingly in front of the men.

SG: Kinda take it in the context that it's given in.

SK: Yeah.

SG: Do you get access to the rumor hotline? Is that something that exists among the men?

SK: I've never really checked into it until just recently. [laughing] I think a lot of it deals with me and what I do. I was surprised to find out just how much people know about everything I'm doing. [laughs] So obviously I didn't have a lot of access to it. I've never really looked into it. You know, you hear just a lot of things about what so and so's doing and where they're going.

SG: Oh, so these are things more than just your work?

SK: Yeah, private lives.

SG: Real nosey?

SK: In some ways.

SG: Does that bother you?

SK: Yeah. I like to think and keep my private life my own, keep my own life my own. I'm private about a lot of things. I have a real need for just my own privacy. I like living by myself. I like being by myself a lot. That's something that causes problems perhaps. A lot of the guys, when we have PT in the morning, run together and exercise together and bullshit together. I like to
do things like that by myself. That's been brought up once or twice.

SG: Is that a problem for them?

SK: Oh, I don’t know. You know, things have been said. Perhaps good humor but perhaps partially seriously.

SG: Do they want you to be more included or something?

SK: I’m not sure.

SG: Have you ever been sexually harassed?

SK: No, not with the jumpers, only actually once with the Forest Service.

SG: What about facilities for women like showering? Do you shower with the men? How does that work?

SK: When you're on a bigger fire and there are showers, there are generally women's showers or they set up times for the women to use the showers.

SG: The women, there's only one woman.

SK: Yeah, as far as we're concerned as jumpers, there is a woman's dorm at Redmond. Well, it's got a woman's shower and a woman's bathroom but guys do stay in there. I don't think Redding's got one. It's got a dorm. In the hotshot barracks I use the showers there. It's just kinda like, Okay, you guys, stay out. It's mine now, type of thing.

SG: Do people respect you wanting that?

SK: I think so. If they don’t, I don’t care because that's the way I want it. Some of them do, but I think most of them don’t really care.

SG: How is that compared to like the Forest Service? I've heard at different points women have had some problems, just different sorts of ways of getting women off crews by just making them take showers with the men, not providing special facilities. Occasionally, they'd be off on a fire for a week or 2 and wouldn't be provided for any kind of facilities for getting periods.

SK: I guess that's something I've just learned not to expect. If you're in a big fire camp, you figure, if they have showers, then they're gonna have them for the women and the men, or the women are gonna get together and say, okay, we want in, or they'll set up a time. If you don't, I've just learned to always try and be prepared. I'll go off by myself and take a shower or a bath in the creek, if we're up someplace and out for a few days, and if there is a creek. You learn to
deal with it, I've learned to deal with it, just on my own.

SG: You have to be pretty independent, I guess.

SK: Yes.

SG: Have you ever worked on a crew with another woman?

SK: Yeah. I've learned not to expect things because women are relatively new in fire. They've been around for awhile but there's been very few women. They're starting to learn to deal with them now in dealing with the men. I don't get real excited if they don't. You just find a way around it, or you try and find a way around it. Most of the guys don't mind. I'm willing to work with you [men jumpers] and work around it. Some of them don't and some of them never will.

SG: Do you look forward to going back there next season and having things perhaps be different, maybe easier?

SK: Hopefully, things will be a little easier. Hopefully, the guys will get to know me a little better, and not worry about being around me and be afraid that I'll take things wrong and be able to joke with me a little more.

SG: Do you think if you put that on the rumor hotline, is that the kind of thing that can go on? To put the word out that you're not trying to harass anybody.

SK: I did, or, I tried. I've said that to a couple of people. I can't understand why guys feel that way. A couple of people have told me that that's the way that some of the guys feel. They're just afraid to say things. I don't understand the reason for it unless they wanna for some reason, get real nasty, and try and do something really nasty, whatever that may be. I'm not gonna do anything. I'd take jokes. You know, if anyone came to me to talk to me, I don't care. I'm not gonna call it harassment.

SG: Have any of the men ever talked to you about feeling strange that a woman might wanna be a smokejumper? You did speak about other people thinking it was kinda hard. It was hard for them to understand why you would be a smokejumper?

SK: Not really. Not that I can think of. I can’t remember right off hand.

SG: Do you feel like your position is a real skilled position? Would you call yourself a professional of what you do?

SK: Yeah, I guess I'd have to say as far as firefighting goes.

SG: Like when you talk about becoming a smokejumper and another career goal you can think
of moving up through the ranks is a squad leader and foreman, dispatchers, whatever—if you just stayed working in the Forest Service, would you feel like that was a professional position?

[pause]

Like if you were staying working on suppression crew on fire and fuels.

SK: I'd have to say, I guess, yes, because it's not a job that a lot of people know. A lot of people don't know it very well if you've done it for very long. I mean it's not what people consider a professional job or anything like that. I think that it is actually. I don't know how to explain that one. Jumping is actually a profession, a professional job I think. I need to learn it a little better.

SG: Do you have plans for the things you're gonna work on next year, especially? What areas do you wanna improve in?

SK: Jumping. I need to get my manipulations down a little better. I'd like to learn a little bit more about spotting, but that'll just have to be from talking to the guys. I'd like to get my letdown a little better. There's a lot of things I need to learn. I don't know a whole lot about saws. A lot I know, a lot I need to know.

SG: Do you feel like you did pretty well though the first couple of years.

SK: Yeah, I think so. I did my job, I think. I did it to their expectations, I hope. Nobody ever had anything to say negatively about the work I did.

SG: Do you get any kind of feedback, like do they do evaluations of you?

SK: No. I've talked to guys a couple of times and just said, well, how did I do? you know, to the squad leaders on some of the bigger fires. They've never had anything bad to say. I think I've done all right. I don't know what exactly maybe what all their expectations are. Some of them, I guess, expect that for a woman I do okay. [laughs] If I was a man, how would I be? I've heard that one before.

SG: That must have made you feel good.

SK: I don't know.

SG: At least you don't hear too many of those.

SK: No. [laughs]

SG: Well, it sounds like you like your job as a smokejumper.
SK: I do. I like it a lot.

SG: So you're at least planning to go back for two more years, maybe longer.

SK: Well, I'm hoping to. I don't know how it'll work, but I'm hoping to go back. I'd like to.

SG: Well, I'll have to talk to you again when you're a 4th-year rookie.

SK: Yeah. [laughs]

SG: Can you be a rookie after 4 years? [laughs]

SK: No. [laughs] No.

SG: Is there anything that you'd like to mention or talk about smokejumping that we haven't mentioned or I haven't asked you, that's maybe special? Like your most exciting fire or anything that you felt was just a little out of the ordinary.

SK: No. I just think it's a little different being a woman. Expectations are different from the people. I think the guys are gonna have to learn to live with it. [laughs] I just hope that they can learn to live with it. I mean can learn to live with it a little earlier and accept you for just another person out there and not a woman. That's kinda what I'm looking for the next year or 2 if I'm still jumping. That's the way things'll start turning out.

SG: Good.

[End of Interview]