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I guess we'll start, Bill. We start a lot of these tapes with historical events like when and where you were born and things like that to kind of put into perspective how long a span you've had in the fur trade in Montana. Were you born in Montana?

No, I was born in South Dakota -- Rapid City, South Dakota.

Oh? What year?

1903.

1903. How old were you when you became involved the first time in the fur industry?

In fur? Well, when I came to Montana, it was almost a necessity. We settled in Broadwater County, and there was lots of fur in that area at that time, and as kids we did a lot of trapping. And first of all, place to find a market was Goldbergs. They were in Helena. So we sold a lot of stuff to Leo and his brother, Erwin. He usually worked the country and made a pretty fancy market for us because it was quick and easy to git money.

How old were you about this time when you were first trappin'?

When I quit trappin'? (Mrs. Cottrill) Started.

Were you a pretty young boy when you started trappin'?

I imagine probably when we started, we was about -- oh, my brother he was about twelve, and I was probably about thirteen, fourteen. And then of course, as we grew up, got out of school and grew up, then we had to go to work. So we did a little trapping on the side. And from there on through, he did more trapping than I did, until I got up to this job at Goldbergs in nineteen -- October 17, 1928 -- I went to work at Goldbergs.

Is that right? Did you go to work for 'im, beings you had sold fur to 'im and got to know the fella? Is that how you went to work for 'im?

Mm-hmm. They were lookin' for a man, and I just happened to stumble onto the job. I was looking for a city job anyway, 'cause I'd had quite a bit of experience in farming; it wasn't very profitable. And so I come over to Goldbergs and went to
work. Started out as a messenger boy. We had a lot of furs those days, a lot of packages. Shipments from all over the northwest come in. There was times when I had to make two trips to the post office with a ton and a-half truck to git the packages.

EN Holy cow!

BC Especially on Monday. They would go to town Saturday and ship their furs out to Goldbergs, and then Monday and Tuesday was our big days.

EN Had Goldbergs been in Helena for quite awhile when you went to work for 'em?

BC Well, they opened up here in 1914. And then Leo went off to war, and then he came back and it was about 1917 or '18, I think, when they opened up for the second time to make a business out of it and continue on.

EN Were they primarily interested just in buying furs, or they make garments there too?

BC Not at that time. They didn't start the ready-to-wear business until after -- well, about 1932.

EN How long did you work as a messenger boy?

BC How long ---?

EN Did you work pickin' up packages and stuff?

BC Oh, we got a little off the track here; we're gonna have to catch up now. Well, in the spring -- Leo came to me the spring of '29 -- he came to me and he said, "You know, we could get somebody else to take your job, and we'll put you on the road." So I said, "Leo, I don't know anything about buyin' fur." "Yeah, but you know fur," he said, "So you'll get along all right." So I made several pretty good buys there real early in my beginning, but I had a lot of good friends in different parts of the area, over in White Sulphur, especially. I'd peddled vegetables in there, practically all the time that I was a kid, and so I had a friend over there, Jaff's store, he run the sheep and cattle company at that time, and so I went over, and I bought a big load-a hides.

EN What kinds of furs did you buy?

BC Well, it wasn't furs; it was sheep pelts and cow hides. And dry cow hides was quite in demand at that time, so I brought in a big load. I'll never forget how funny it was. I went out in the morning, and 'bout three o'clock in the afternoon I come
And Leo says, "Oh, you can't do that. You gotta stay out longer'n that." "Well," I said, "I've had a load. Got a load, so I thought I'd better come in and unload it and then go out again." "Got a load?" "Yeah, yeah, I got a load out there." So he went out; he was all excited. He went out'n looked, and sure enough, I had a load of pelts. I got 'em all from Jaff Stuart. And from then on, I had a reputation of goin' out, and never comin' home without a load. And I was pretty successful bein' able to do that.

EN: When did you move into buyin' furs from buyin' cow hides?

BC: Well, next winter and next season when the fur season came up, why I never stopped. I went buyin' fur, then. And I had pretty good knowledge of fur. We'd done a lotta trappin', one thing and another. There was lots of muskrats those days -- lots of muskrats.

EN: About what price were you payin' back in those days for muskrats?

BC: Well, about 1929, muskrats to a trapper was thirty-five cents.

EN: For a nice, big, large muskrats?

BC: Well, it was a little more.

EN: That's pretty good.

BC: So it wasn't too bad. They were all glad to get the thirty-five cents. So it went along that way for -- oh, we'll say several years -- prices was low, and then the prices began to pick up a little bit, along about 1934 or '35, began to pick up. And coyotes went up high for those days.

EN: Oh? What were they averaging, about?

BC: Well, they went up to about twenty, twenty-two dollar average. Made good, Montana's up to about thirty dollars.

EN: Which was really good money for them days.

BC: It was good money. So that lasted for quite a little spell, and then down she went. And our first season of coyotes cost us probably about twenty dollars. Our next season's coyotes cost us about fifteen dollars, our next season of coyotes cost us about seven dollars, and the next time, we was hidin' in the cellar so we didn't have to buy 'em at all.

EN: Primarily, did you buy a lot of water fur in those days? Was that more your primary furs, like beaver and muskrat and mink?
BC Well, the beaver business was all tag business then. It was very strict. You had to have a license to trap, and had a reason to trap 'em, and all that stuff. But there was a lotta beaver. And believe it or not, we had a monopoly on that.

EN Oh?

BC They all had to come to Helena to be tagged. So we got the first crack at 'em. So that kinda hurt our competitors. They were a little disappointed in that. But it went along that way for several years that they shipped all the beaver into the State Game Department, and the Game Department tagged 'em. And then of course, they were instructed to take 'em down to Goldbergs and get the first offer on 'em.

EN You know we're taggin' beaver again now in Montana?

BC Yeah, I know. I know that.

EN How'd you get along with that tagging back then? Was it a big pain?

BC Well, we took the truck, and they'd call us at the Game Department, tell us that the beaver was tagged for that day, and they were ready to come down, and so we'd go pick up two, three hundred — anywheres from two to — I think probably the limit was about twelve beaver, or something like that.

EN Was that state-wide limit?

BC Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was all regulated there, so that it covered the state. But you had to make application, and the reason for your application was that the beaver was destroyin' your property, or waterin' your hay field or something of that sort.

EN The beaver trappin' was closed until the tagging came on, for quite a few years.

BC Closed before that?

EN Yeah.

BC Now I wouldn't say. I don't know when they started the beaver deal at all. But I imagine probably pretty early, probably maybe 1901, 1902, something like that, because it was pretty well regulated when I got into the thing where I knew what was goin' on.

EN When you bought fur for Goldberg through those years, did you buy on a percentage, or did he just pay you a wage?
BC  He paid me a wage. And the only way I could beat the wage was stay out in the country.

EN  Oh, is that right?

BC  'Cause I got my expenses when I was in the country.

EN  I see.

BC  So it worked out fine.

EN  Did he pay you pretty good? About what was your wage in those days?

BC  Well, yes, I was gettin' pretty good pay. Probably about a hundred dollars a month. And then it crept up a little bit, and crept up a little bit. Then the fur business went bad and I still kept what I had got for wages. I kept that, but things went down. Fur prices went down.

EN  About what period was it that the prices fell?

BC  Oh, that was probably -- they started back down along about 1938, '39, I think. In 1943, we had about a hundred thousand dollars worth of coyotes on our hands, and they went down to nothin'. Those coyotes cost us a lot of money, and we practically couldn't give 'em away.

EN  So you had a big loss on coyotes that year.

BC  We had a terrific loss. We always figured that, well, it broke us. That one jolt broke us. It was around about a hundred thousand dollars.

EN  In rough figures, about what kind of volume was Goldberg dealing in in his height, when they were doin' the best, say? Do you have any idea?

BC  Yeah, about the average for a peak, he done about two hundred and fifty, three hundred thousand dollars a year.

EN  This would be in about '35, '36, in there?

BC  Well, yeah, and there on up to '43.

EN  Which was a lotta money in those days.

BC  It was a lot of money.

EN  I see. But two brothers, now, they ran the Goldberg Company.
BC Well, Ervin was a buyer, the same as I. He worked one part of the country, and I worked another part of the country. But it didn't make any difference. If we knew somebody over there, why we'd go over in one another's territory and pick it up if we felt like we wanted to do it.

EN Did you extend out very far from Helena in your buying?

BC Oh, yes, I got over to -- I got over to Seeley Lake, and I did a lot of business in White Sulphur and down around Big Timber and up around West Yellowstone and over in Hamilton and maybe a little further out than that in different places.

EN How often did you come back in? As soon as you got a load?

BC Soon as we got a load. Soon as I had enough so I was afraid I might lose it if I stayed out some place. But didn't take long to pick up a load. Go out one day and come back the next, and you'd normally have a load; enough that would pay you to come in with it.

EN We've seen a lot of changes in buyers. I know the new modern buyers, they're here one day and gone the next. What do you think's the matter with those people?

BC Well, people go into the fur business, they git a few dollars and they go into the fur business, and think they're gonna make a fortune. Well, it's not a fortune maker, nor never was. It's the most competitive business on the face of the earth. Go compare it with any, and you'll find that to be a fact.

EN I know, I've talked to other buyers -- like Lawrence Humble was one that I've talked to -- and Lawrence told me, he says -- we got to talkin' about some of the newer buyers in our times -- and he said, "You know," he says, "I always worked on seven percent," he said. Did you have a method like that when you bought?

BC We bought a lot of fur from Lawrence Humble. Bought an awful lot of fur from 'is brother John.

(Comment from Mrs. Cottrill) Bill, but not on a seven per cent basis.

BC Oh, no. He bought it for us. He bought it and we bought it from him, and what he could make on it with his profits, I never got into the percentage...

(Mrs. Cottrill) No, what he paid for it was his own business.

EN Yeah. There was a lot of difference 'tween them two brothers, I guess; between Johnny and Lawrence.
BC Yeah, yeah. Old Lawrence, he's -- Is he still over there?
EN No, Lawrence passed away last year.
BC Yeah, that's what I thought.
EN Yeah, I guess Johnny's still there.
BC John lives in Deer Lodge.
EN Yeah.
BC I'm not gonna say what I was goin' to.
EN Well, you feel free to express your opinion. That's all right. Lawrence, he told me a few stories about Johnny and stuff.
BC John was a good trapper.
EN I guess so.
BC So was Lawrence, as far as that goes.
EN I didn't know Johnny. I know Lawrence, he was a king of a guy, I thought, in a lot of ways; fine fella. Bought a lot of fur. He bought fur the morning he died.
BC Yeah, I spose.
EN Yeah, that was probably a -- pretty good way.
BC There was quite a bit of difference in 'em both ways. I think Lawrence was a pretty well-educated man. He had a degree or two.
EN Oh?
BC He worked at the bug -- what do they call it over there?
EN The research center; Rocky Mountain Research Center.
BC Yeah. He worked there. But I don't know about John's education. He's probably about like I am. Didn't have much.
EN You get your education in the school of life. That's what Louis was saying.
BC Well, that's a pretty rough deal sometimes, to get it that way.
EN Did you have quite a family when you were buyin' fur, or did you become married to your wife buyin' fur?

BC Oh yeah, I caught up with her, and -- in 1934, wasn't it? Didn't we git married ---?

(Mrs. C.) We both came from Townsend. We went together six years before we got married.

BC We got two boys. They're both good boys. Couldn't be better. So we don't have a big family, but we got a good family.

EN Did your family become involved in your fur buying at all?

BC No, no. I guess that all is gettin' away from us. I got one boy in the National Guard, and the other fella, he's got a grass farm out here in the valley. So he does pretty good, and the other fella's got a good income so they're doin' all right.

(Mrs. C.) But we did buy Goldberg's ourselves, later.

EN Oh? How long did the Goldberg Company flourish after the fall in '38 -- or '43, excuse me.

BC Well, let's see. When did I dissolve the thing? '68?

(Mrs. C.) Goldberg's?

BC Yeah.

(Mrs. C.) But we bought it in '52.

BC Yeah. We bought it in '52, but he's askin' how long.

EN That's what I asked you. When did you buy it?

(Mrs. C.) '43? How long was it after '43 until we --?

BC Goldberg? I bought Goldberg out. Well, anyway, let's start out by -- In 1943, I was made manager over there at the warehouse -- Goldberg Fur and Wool House, Incorporated. In 1952 I bought 'em out, and in 1968, I believe this is when I dissolved the corporation. The church wanted to buy me out there. I had a good friend in the church over there, and he always wanted to be sure and sell it -- give the church a chance if I ever sold it. So they bought the property.

EN What was their main interest? Just the property was all? For the church?

BC That's about all they're makin' out of it, a place to
park on Sunday.

(Mrs. C.) They are still renting the building though.

EN Oh, the building still stands?

BC Oh, yeah. the building's over there. That's a good building over there. That's a good building.

EN Did they have a pretty good cold storage unit there on site?

BC That was uptown. That's the ready-to-wear department.

(Mrs. C.) Yeah, he opened that uptown. Then he'd spend his time up there. Mrs. Goldberg wanted that, and him and her went uptown for that. Then he didn't come to the warehouse.

EN Oh, I see.

(Mrs. C.) In fact, well, I worked for him for three years before we bought the place.

BC No, they developed a nice store up there.

(Mrs. C.) And I worked twenty years. Kept the books twenty years.

EN Oh, then your wife was involved in the Goldberg Company too.

(Mrs. C.) For twenty years.

EN Oh, for twenty years. That's pretty good. You were the bookkeepe

(Mrs. C.) Uh huh. I'm a school teacher, I'm a college graduate, a school teacher, and I took an adult education course in high school in accounting and bookkeeping, and I did the work for twenty years.

EN Huh. that's quite a span. After '43 then, when the big crash came, did things just kinda decline down until the point where you bought the company out?

BC Well, it just got to a point where there wasn't enough business, and there wasn't enough money to carry on like we did. Then when you lost a hundred thousand dollars in those days, why that was all of it, 'cause in many cases it was.

EN Was it just a bad guess, as far as the market, that caused that? Or you thought the coyotes would bring more money?

BC Yeah, we couldn't sell 'em. We couldn't sell 'em. And we tried to get our profit -- get our money out of 'em -- but
that didn't work either.

(Mrs. C.) But it was style, too, Bill. It changed from short to long-haired furs. Just like your fox and your ---

EN Coyotes are startin' to decline now, again, I see.

BC Yeah, and every time there's a decline -- that's another peculiar thing about the fur business. When you get a decline in market, you git a decline in catch also. Now why is it?

EN I don't know. That's interesting.

BC Now you see, coyotes went down here to dirt cheap, and the population of coyotes just boomed. Then up went the price, right along with the increase in the number of coyotes we had. There was lots of coyotes here five or six years ago.

EN Yeah.

BC But that's one peculiar thing about the fur deal that nobody's been able to really figure out is why prices go down, and the population of wild fur goes down too. Then when there's a population of wild fur goes up, why the price goes up.

EN Did they make coats for very long at Goldberg's, or was it just a short time they made garments there at this place?

BC Oh no, they were in the fur business and I think they went in the ready-to-wear, along about 1932.

(Mrs. C.) They went into dresses, too.

BC And they stayed in it until they quit.

(Mrs. C.) They made it exclusive, 'cause he went every year and sold his furs, and if they net, then he went to expensive clothes -- exclusive clothes.

EN Oh, I see. Custom-made clothes and things like that?

(Mrs. C.) They were shipped in, but they were exclusive. He would make fur out-a your own, but he didn't do some of the work here. It was -- it was in the east a lot of it was done.

EN Well, Bill, I've heard -- I know Tex will say that every time your name come up --- that you were one of the best beaver men per se, I mean buyers, in knowing quality beaver and what to look for, that he's ever seen. He said he always enjoyed selling furs to you, because he knew that he was sellin' it to somebody that really knew beaver. How did you acquire that knowledge?
Well, I suppose I acquired a certain amount of it through the number of beaver that I handled. When you have a monopoly on the thing — it wasn't exactly a monopoly; those trappers could sell their fur other places if they liked — but we had all the beaver in the state to work at one time, outside of a few that would slip by, or somebody want 'is beaver back with the idea of makin' a coat, or something of that sort. We had it all until they changed the law.

Who was your strongest competition about that time?

Oh, Beckmans was.

Beckmans were?

Yeah, Beckmans. Beckmans -- I always say I didn't have any competition. I'd rather put it that way than to say, "My competitor". And I think Louis would too. He wouldn't say, "Well, it's my competitor". He's just not a competitor of mine. We're in fur business.

I know my approach -- and I wonder if it might apply to you -- is that back in those days -- like the comment you just made -- compared to today. I know the younger buyers, there seems to be a lot more viciousness amongst 'em than there used to be. Do you think that's a true trait, a true statement? That things are a lot more competitive now?

Well, they had a better time to operate, or a better time to buy fur. They all try to make a profit, but a lot of 'em had to learn that there wasn't too much profit in the fur business. And they did, the hard way.

You made it more fun, probably, than you do now, 'cause it's too far between places. Too much expenses with gas and stuff to pick it up!

After you bought Goldberg out, I noticed one time -- the first fur I ever sold in my life was to you in your garage one day, and your check had the Goldberg name on it. Did you maintain that trade mark?

Yeah, I was interested in that. When I bought the place out, Goldberg told me what he'd take for it, and I said, "The name goes too," because it has a reputation behind it -- many years of experience -- and that meant more to me than what fur I could buy, because I knew if the company was known -- which they were under that name -- we wouldn't have any trouble gettin' fur, where if they were shippin' to somebody they didn't know, it makes you skeptical a lot of times, and you have to try 'em out
quite often before you have any faith in 'em.

EN Is there any tie between the Goldberg here in Helena and the one in Seattle?

BC Oh yeah. They're all cousins.

EN Oh, is that all in the same outfit?

BC Second cousins, first cousins and so on.

EN Oh, I see.

BC But they're fine people to deal with, too.

EN I've heard a lot—a trappers say that they go out to Seattle and sell their fur.

BC Ervin — Ervin's a mighty fine businessman.

(Mrs. C.) They go to Alaska and Canada and all over. I mean many traveling buyers too.

EN They're a world-wide fur buyer, then.

(Mrs. C.) As fer as I know. I don't know where their limits are, but I know they went to Alaska, I do know that. They told me so.

EN About what time did you start buyin' fur here at home, rather than in the shop?

BC When I sold out over there.

EN In '68?

BC Yeah. And I would like to be in the fur business yet, as far as I'm concerned. I had every faith in the world that I would stay in the business until I was eighty years old.

EN I see. Had that idea when you were young?

BC I had that idea just not too long after I quit the business.

EN What made you stop buyin'?

BC Oh, just various things. Things was tough. Prices were high, and it was a good time to get out, I guess. But I would-a liked to had that honor to -- bought fur till I was eighty years old.

EN Do you think that if the market gets a little stabler
that you might buy again?

BC Oh, yeah, I might, if somebody approached me right.

(Mrs. C.) Well, it was just -- he just came to a point where he had to busy easy. Times have changed. You can't stay on the road with a whole bunch of fur out half the night either. The kids realize that, you know. Used to be a time when you could do that, but you can't do that any more. And that's when you picked your trappers up lots of times because they'd trapped all day.

EN They'd trap during the day, and then buy fur at night.

(Mrs. C.) And then you'd buy 'em, sell 'em at night. I mean, that's the reason you went home at night. We're having a different world now than we had at that time.

EN Seems a different set of standards?

(Mrs. C.) You bet your life. They could stop you on the road with a whole car load of fur, you know.

BC You know, if this Social Security business keeps on a-ringing' like it is, I might have to go back to buy fur.

EN To keep yourself in beans. Yeah.

(Mrs. C.) Well, after we got into our house, we remodeled it, and we went into leather. And we had jackets made and moccasins. My book work didn't take all my time. And we did very good in that, so we had something for summer. Otherwise we wouldn't have had anything for summer, you see, and that helped our goods a lot.

EN After Bill bought the company, then you became more involved than you had before, even?

(Mrs. C.) Well, I just worked for Goldberg and did what he wanted me to do, you see. And then after we bought it, why then we changed the front, and we went into leather, Bill. Didn't we, Bill? We bought the very best leather we could buy, all buckskin, and we had jackets made, and that gave us something for summer, as well as winter, but that gave us a good year. That was a good thing for us in the fur business. 'Cause you know the fur business, you just sit there four or five months with nothing to do.

EN Did you store garments for people at that time, too?

(Mrs. C.) No, no, we had nothing to do with the store uptown at all.

BC No, we never made any fur. We did do tanning, that is
custom tanning for people.

(Mrs. C.) For deer hides and stuff.

BC And we had our tanning done mostly in New York City Fur. They had the best processors there ... there is in the fur business.

EN Was there as big a foreign fur market influence as there is today in those days, the '30's and 40's? Louis Salinas made a comment in the interview I did with him, that today the fur market, as far as quantity, has moved back over to Europe. They're doing more garments there, and more tanning, whereas as one time, he said, the United States had gotten more heavily into it.

(Mrs. C.) They don't like you to kill 'em now, skin 'em, you see. They're doing all that pushing, that advertising all the time about killing the poor little animal for his hide.

EN Oh, on the TV.

(Mrs. C.) On the TV. And that's pretty rough. Even when -- I knew -- First Lady went and got that mink coat. She was sure told about it too, and they told 'er not to wear it. .....

EN Yeah. She seems like a fine lady, doesn't she?

(Mrs. C.) Oh, wonderful ...?

EN I think he holds a lot of promise for us, that man, Mr. Reagan.

(Mrs. C.) Well, I think your ranch mink was one of the things that --?-- from the foreign market, because they ran into colors. People went into so many colors.

EN What types of fur did you like to buy the most?

BC Beaver!

EN You liked the beaver the best, huh?

BC I had a yard stick, and I think I've left from one to two or sometimes five at most of the houses in the area in which I worked. And it had there: "Leo M. Goldberg Fur & Wool House; We specialize in beaver." I'll give you one.

EN OK, I'd appreciate that. What was about second, would you say, ... preference for buying. What did you like next?

BC Oh, muskrat was a good item to buy. I never cared too much for coyote, but you had to buy 'em, and they were a good item, but there's some things you don't like as well as you do
others. But beaver, I loved 'em.

EN You trapped for awhile when you were younger. Did you ever go back to trapping or you got out of it?

BC No, No, I stayed at Goldbergs.

EN I see. You never went back to trapping.

(Mrs. C.) Our kids never trapped.

EN You never taught your boys how to trap, huh?

BC Oh, no. No. No. I never went back. I had a job, and it was a good job. We didn't git the biggest pay in the world, but we managed to have things pretty good and lived pretty good.

EN Well, you have a very beautiful home, I'll say that.

(Mrs. C.) Well, we sold our old home and built this one.

EN You sold the other one and built this one. How did you like buyin' those Seeley Lake beaver?

BC Well, when I wanted good beaver, I knew where to go. And Seeley Lake was the first one. Hamilton had good beaver, the Bitterroot Valley, and White Sulphur had beaver equal to anything you could pull out of Alaska.

EN Oh, is that right? I didn't know that. I thought they'd be alkali beaver over there.

BC Oh, no. There's a beautiful beaver comes from White Sulphur, especially up in those mountains. Those mountain beaver are beautiful. And they got the size. They've got a little edge on the size of the Seeley Lake beaver.

EN Oh?

BC You git bigger beaver over there.

(Mrs. C.) You liked Anaconda, too.

BC Yeah, Anaconda and Butte had good beaver.

(Mrs. C.) You liked everything in Anaconda.

BC And Whitehall has an average beaver. It's right over the hill from Butte.

EN I see. Doesn't take much move to change their ...
BC No, it's odd. They're all the way up through there. I've bought lots of beaver on that Jefferson and Madison and the Ruby river.

EN Do you have any idea, Bill -- just a kind of a curiosity question -- how many beaver you bought in your time?

BC In my life? No, I wouldn't want-a make anything definite, but I would say probably say 150 to 200,000.

EN That's a lot-a beaver skins.

BC Mm-h-mm. Really is. Lots of beaver.

EN And a lot of people -- people that will be later listening to our conversation; we're talkin' about buyin' beaver and prices and grades and things like that -- don't quite understand. Could you kind-a run down, when you were buyin' a beaver skin, what you'd look for to determine how much it was gonna be worth?

BC Yes. I don't know, maybe I was overstretchin' it a little bit, but I could usually look at a pile of beaver over there and tell you what was in there without ever openin' it up. I just felt like I was sure I knew. And I didn't miss. But we bought lots of beaver from South Dakota, we bought lots of beaver from Wyomin'. we bought lots of beaver from Utah. There's a type of beaver in Utah that's a very good quality. Then there's another type that isn't.

EN So they have two different types.

BC Yeah.

EN Sort-a like Montana, in a way.

BC And then when Idaho opened up, why we got a lot of beaver out-a Idaho.

EN Were they pretty good beaver?

BC Beautiful. Beautiful.

EN Nice, dark beaver?

BC Mm h-mm.

EN I know today, this year, when beaver were sellin' in '81, I talked to a fella, Bob Young in Great Falls, and 'e told me, he says, "I'll knock you a grade for every hole. That's how severe
he was. Was grading as severe in those days when you graded beaver?

BC Yeah. They had lots of beaver to work, and they had a lot of grades too.

(Mrs. C.) But the holes in 'em. You had to grade out the holes, too.

En Did you grade for nap and texture and all those things too?

BC Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, that's a big thing.

(Mrs. C.) Color, border....

BC And bordered beaver.

EN What's bordered?

BC What is bordered beaver? Well, Wyoming had lots of bordered beaver, and eastern Montana had a lot of bordered beaver. Now they had a red edge on a large beaver, on a blanket beaver, would run anywhere from two inches to six. On the edge it had red hair in it, and it was impossible to do anything with that, other than take it out of there.

(Mrs. C.) They told you to cut that off, you see, when they manufactured it.

EN I know trappers'll set and talk about how to handle fur, and some'll say you gotta stretch 'em oval, and some perfect as a dollar. What's your comment on that?

BC Now how did you say that?

EN How to stretch beaver. Some trappers say to stretch beaver oval-shaped, couple inches longer than wide, and some say perfect as a dollar.

BC Well, an oval-shape beaver, you can put it up in a lot nicer shape. There is beaver -- there is fish tails, they called 'em -- they skinned 'em out just like a cow hide. But the quality's there and everything, but the looks of 'em. And they were down-graded.

EN I see. Just because of the way they were stretched.

BC Just because of the way they was stretched. Indians skinned 'em that way, and then there were Indians that stretched 'em on hooks made out-a willows. And they stretched their beaver round. And there was a lot-a Alaskan beaver at one time that come in fish tails.
EN Did they always stretch beaver on boards, as they do today, most people, or did they used to use wire hooks and things?

BC No, about the same.

EN 'Bout the same?

BC There's not much difference. Boards were hard to get, but they stretched 'em on wagon wheels, that is the tire on a wagon wheel, and made hooks out-a willow; that was a pretty common thing. But I was gonna tell you about Tex Baker. Tex Baker put up the finest beaver that I ever handled.

EN Oh? For all-round handling, huh?

BC All-around handling. They were perfect. So one day I bought a nice lot-a beaver from Tex, and I said, "Tex, when are you comin' over?" "Oh," he says, "I'll be over your way one of these days." And I says, "I'd like to have you go with me and I wanna show you something." "OK." So Tex came along, and I was on my way, goin' to White Sulphur. And, "I want you to go with me." So I threw in two of his beaver, a big one and a small one. "What're you takin' me along for?" And I said, "Well, I wanna show you something we get over there." There was a man in White Sulphur that handled beaver so close to the way that Tex Baker handled 'em that you couldn't tell 'em apart.

EN Is that right? I'll be danged. That was somethin'. What did Tex say when you got there?

BC Oh, Tex was pretty thrilled about that.

EN Is that right?

BC Yeah, he was pretty thrilled about that. But that's something that you never see, there's two hundred miles difference between 'em, you know. But Bill Short handled beaver just exactly as Tex Baker handles 'em.

EN That was a trapper in White Sulphur, huh?

(Mrs. C.) He passed away this winter. And he had a brother -- Short was the president of the college in Billings just recently ... But he died this winter; he had heart disease.

EN Well, Tex has been like a second father to me, as far as fur handling, and I'll be forever grateful to 'im for the hours he spent in slappin' my hands for makin' mistakes and stuff. And he told me, he says, "You know," he says, "It takes me awhile to skin a beaver." He says, "I can't skin one in three minutes or five minutes like Lawrence Humble said he could." But
he says, "When I git done with 'em, they're worth what they're worth."

BC Does a nice job on 'is fur. And he's a little tough on
the price. He wants to get all he can out of 'em. Can't blame
'im for that.

EN No, you can't. I've always admired that. He told me
when I first got started trappin', he says, "You find your own
tracks," he says, "but when you find 'em, come on by, and I'll
show you how to take care of 'em." Did you ever have any
apprentice, or anybody you taught how to grade fur or buy fur?

BC Oh, no, no. Oh, maybe I learned some things from buyers
comin' through the country. When I went into fur business, there
was hundreds of fur buyers. I mean out in New York. They were
buyin' from dealers; they were buyin' dealers' lots. And it was
nothing to be upstairs in the grading room, workin' with one man,
and two settin' down in the office, waitin' for their turn. And
that all passed on.

EN I see. Did you ever have any young man that you taught yourself?

BC Oh no, no. Not enough to say yes.

EN I see. Just now and then, you'd have a young guy, but he
just wouldn't stick to it.

BC It would've been nice if I could've found a fella that
would be interested enough to wanna learn something about fur.
But they're limited. I think my oldest boy, probably he'd made
a good fur buyer, but he wasn't too interested in it.

(Mrs. C.) They sold 'em the deer hides at night after school,
and they had plenty of things to do. There was some good work to
do. ... If I were alone through the day, and somebody'd come in,
I'd come and help 'em.

EN Oh, I see. So your wife minded shop while you were out
in the country sometimes, huh?

BC She stayed in the office.

(Mrs. C.) But I bought lots of fur.

EN Oh, you were a buyer too?

(Mrs. C.) Didn't I, Bill?

BC Yeah, yeah, you did pretty well.

(Mrs. C.) I never bought if he was there. It wasn't my line of
work, but then ....

En Well, it's kinda interesting the different things that have come down through the sixty or seventy-year period, isn't it? Some of the changes and things like that?

(Mrs. C.) Well, lots of people trusted, and they left their furs in here till the next day, and we put it away for them and everything. They trusted us, so --- We had been there long enough that they knew us so ...

EN How did you get along with the trappers, Bill? Pretty good?

BC Well, I got along good. Just a remark, and maybe you can get a laugh out of it. I got kicked out of a house once.

EN Just one time in all those years?

BC But I never lost the friendship with the lady or the son. And I bought furs from 'em several years after I got kicked out.

EN Oh, was it a dispute over the furs?

BC No.

EN Oh?

BC No, it wasn't. I'd bought the fur, and Danny thought that I hadn't paid enough for the female mink. But the females were small, and I had to buy 'em at a sacrifice. But he didn't realize that.

EN I see.

BC But I bought a lot-a fur after that from 'em, many times. He come here after I sold out the warehouse. Come here and I bought their fur from 'em. The boy, he was a real good friend of mine. I don't think he would-a sold 'is furs to anybody else.

EN After you closed out the Goldberg building uptown and started buying at home, did you still ship to say New York, or did you ship elsewhere?

BC Oh, yeah, we shipped to New York and shipped to Seattle. Seattle turned out to be a good market.

EN Is that right?

BC Yeah. I think probably now that you've got a new breed in New York that --- Seattle is the best market.
EN By a "new breed", what do you mean there?
BC New people in the business.
EN Oh, younger people?
BC Younger people and newer people in the business. All the old ones are gone.
EN I guess there's two coat manufacturers now in Montana that I know. Beckman's is left, and there's a new one started up in Missoula. Fella by the name of Gus Proto started makin' coats over there.
BC Oh, buyin' from dealers?
EN Well, he's not buyin' fur so much as he buys tanned goods, and then 'e makes the coats out of 'em.
BC Oh, Oh, I see. Well, well, Tandy's got a big shop over there too.
EN Uh, huh. that's true.
BC And they got a little shop here in town, but I don't know how well they do. But Tandy in Missoula's got a big place there. Nice place.
EN Was there any other garment manufacturers besides Beckman and Goldbergs during that time?
BC Oh, there was a fella in Billings, Colwin, I believe was his name.
EN Coleman:
(Mrs. C.) Cohen -- C-o-h-e-n, wasn't it? Mike Cohen, somethin' like that?
BC Cohen.
EN Did he flourish very long?
BC Oh yeah. He made fur. He made garments of all kinds.
(Mrs. C.) "Course, they weren't into garments. ....
BC Is Louis still makin' buckskin stuff?
EN Yeah, in fact he still makes some of the best you can get your hands on.
(Mrs. C.) I'll bet. that stuff is high-priced.

EN Yeah, I don't know, compared to what yours was like, but I know Tex has often commented, he said, you know, "If you want good buckskin," he says, "you ain't gonna find it nowadays, any better." And I think you can buy a whole hide or a half a hide -- I think a half a hide's fourteen dollars or somethin' like seventeen dollars.

BC Deer skin?

EN Yeah, buckskin, uh-huh.

BC Well, I got to correct you on that. There's only one type of buckskin. It's Indian-tanned buckskin. Deer skin, commercially tanned, is deer skin.

EN Oh? I didn't know that.

BC It's not buckskin, it's deer skin.

EN What's Indian-tanned?

BC I don't know. Nobody else knows.

(Mrs. C.) She chews it.

EN The Indian woman?

BC Nobody else knows how he does it, or what he does, but it always turns out white, you know.

EN It's white. And the deer skin is the yellow.

BC Well, the deerskin -- oh, it's various colors.

(Mrs. C.) We can get them in six colors.

BC They got good many colors of deer skin.

EN Is there much difference in -- supple, or --?

BC The quality?

EN Yeah

BC Well, buckskin is buckskin, and deer skin is deer skin. There is a difference..

EN Is the buckskin better, you think?
Well, a buckskin for certain things is ...

(Mrs. C.) Some of the deer skin is split, you know, so on both sides ...

The deer skin's the nicest to work and make garments out of and everything. The Indians don't do too good a job of makin' up garments. Sometimes they're not so good.

There's a lot of interest today in younger people that I've talked to, in going back to the old ways. I know there are some friends of mine that are trying the old Indian ways of tanning and making buckskin.

Well, the Indian didn't use acid, and this taxidermist outfit in Nebraska -- I forgit the town now -- they got an acid tan that turns out just like the old type of buckskin.

It turns out white, then?

But the Indian didn't use acid.

I guess they used brains, and all kinds of things like that.

Different things, oil of different kinds and one thing or another to soften it, but they've got an acid tan that they claim is equal to an Indian buckskin.

Did you buy much Indian buckskin when you first got started?

Never.

Oh?

Oh, occasionally an Indian come in that had somethin' to sell.

(Mrs. C.) But we never bought the buckskin. We bought deer hide, but not buckskin. But they like our leather.

Oh, they did?

(Mrs. C.) I'm surprised at the Indians that bought from us.

I'll be danged.

Fella by the name of McCardy down in Idaho Falls -- well, he was at Blackfoot, his shop was -- he dealt in Indian-tanned leather and Indian-tanned goods. Made lots-a gloves and stuff.

Was this in the '30's and '40's?
BC I don't know whether he's down there yet or not.

EN Did you buy a lot-a mink in your time?

BC Yeah, in my area was lots of mink.

EN Good mink?

BC Good.

EN Nice, large, dark --

BC Large mink; what they wanted. Most of the time, they've always wanted large-skinned, large-hide mink, and females, small females, were hard to sell. They always have been. Now and then somebody pops up with a garment idea or something like that, but those big toms, they always brought the big money.

EN Was it mainly because they were easy to work into garments, that was the style? The difference in size and price between the female and ---

BC Well. that was the whole situation. They could take big mink and make a fur piece out of it. Well say two mink would make a fur piece, where it was hard to get a fur piece out of five of the little mink. It took that extra work to do it, you see.

EN Did you ever buy your wife a fur coat?

BC Yeah. Yes, I bought her a fur coat. I bought 'er a beaver coat.

(Mrs. C.) Before we were married.

BC And the beaver came from White Sulphur.

EN I see.

BC And they were beautiful. She had it a long time, but takes a little while to style a pretty fast.

(Mrs. C.) Well, it was left with the heavy on it. You know, they didn't sheer it. And it had a shawl collar. And it had a double cuff to here (points). I know that thing weighed a hundred pounds. And then I had Mr. Goldberg send me back a new stylist and they restyled it and fixed it. But for some reason, they made the leather kind of hard and I didn't like it, so I always said I handle too much fur. I had the coat with nice collars. I often bought people collars.
Oh, a fur collar on a coat you have?

(Mrs. C.) I'd like a nice collar. I bought a lovely collar. If I bought a nice dress coat, I bought a nice collar... We got no discount for anything that we bought.

Did you make it through the depression years pretty good as a buyer?

I was on top all the time.

During the depression?

(Mrs. C.) That's when we got married in the depression. It was very boring.

I'll tell you how I worked it. I got my expenses when I was on the road, out in the country. So I stayed on the road out in the country. And that way my whole pay check was cream, so it worked out pretty good. I didn't have any difficulties doin' it.

What was your expenses?

Well, hotel room, three squares a day and gasoline, oil...

Did you drive a truck then, or a car?

Oh yeah. Yeah, we had a truck all the time. You needed a truck more those days than you do now, because farmers had cow hides hangin' on the fence, you know. Had to buy those too.

Was it a ton truck or ton-and-a-half?

I had a three-quarter ton truck -- Chevy -- with a high box on it. That truck had a cab on the back, a canopy affair. So when we got it, in order to pile a big high load on it, we had to cut the top off. So that's what we did. But it had a high box so it was good. You could throw fur in there, throw muskrats, especially.

Did you tarp it if the weather got bad?

And the way we held those muskrats down was put a couple cow hides on tap and then tie 'em down. Muskrats couldn't get out.

Did you have to tarp it in bad weather, so it didn't get all wet?

Oh yeah. Yeah, once in a while you got into a bad storm.
What year truck was it? Do you remember?

Oh, I imagine probably it was about a '34, I believe that was when I had that three-quarter ton truck.

Did it run quite awhile for you?

Yeah ---

(Mrs. C.) Well, you went to work there in '28. You must-a had somethin' earlier than '34.

Well, I had a Whippet -- International Whippet. But that didn't amount to too much. A little truck; little outfit.

Wasn't much for buyin'.

But we kept it. Kept it around the place here for several years and bought fur in it, and --- well then we got a-hold of this big Chevrolet truck, the three-quarter ton, and that was a nice outfit.

Did you usually travel by yourself?

Oh yeah.

Always, huh? Did you ever have any bad experiences on the road?

No, I was pretty cautious. I never had any bad experiences.

Do you like workin' with people out in the field and meetin' new people?

Yeah, yeah, your clients are very interesting people in your travels. That's an old remark, you know. And you do, you find some very interesting people.

(Mrs. C.) We have a lot of people come to see us yet, calling to say hello.

Uh huh. I bet you made a lot of friends out there.

Well, I hope so.

Usually when you bought a trapper's fur, then did you go right to his house, or did you stop in a town and have a kind of a ---

No, we went right out to the farmer 'imself and bought 'is fur. It was that idea that was tried, but I don't think it
was ever a success to notify a community that you'd be in town a
certain day, and you'd be at so-and-so's bar, or so-and-so's gas
station. But it didn't turn out to be a success; it didn't last long.

EN Some days, did you spend one of your meals with the family?

(Mrs. C.) Eat with 'em, you mean? Oh, no.

BC Another thing, you make friends with people if you try,
and you know what you're doin' there, and they had a nice bill of
goods for you, and you're going back there. You make customers
that way. Oh, I've got customers I know that been with me
practically all the time that I was in the fur business. I got
some over around Alder, and some over around White Sulphur, and
they just stuck by me all those years.

EN I know Tex has made the comment the last few years that
he wished you were still buyin' beaver.

BC Yeah.

EN Did you ever do any fur handling critique when you were
buyin' furs? Say, "Well, why don't next time you try this and
then I can pay you a little bit more."

BC Oh, yes, I've helped a lot of fellas out by showin' 'em
how to handle their fur. But the way I showed 'em was take one
of Tex Baker's well-handled beaver with me and show 'im what it
looks like. Then he tries to equal it; to do as good a job, so
you do get results in that aspect.

(Mrs. C.) Well, he brought lots of skin home too, as far as
muskrats are concerned, sometimes.

EN Oh, you bought a lot of fur in the carcass, did you?

(Mrs. C.) Not the beaver.

BC Well, that's another sour deal, that is. All right, a
guy's got thirty-five muskrats, and he's got four that isn't
skinned. Well, throw 'em all in. That's how that works. But
I've turned away from coyotes, because most of the time with
coyotes, it's some fella that just got one coyote, and 'e's left
it lay out behind the shed for two weeks or a month. Then you
come along lookin' for fur, and he wants to sell you that thing.
Well, you don't know what you're gettin'. So I'd rather back off
from that.

EN And buy the already-handled merchandise?

BC Buy the stuff that's all ready. A good trapper's got 'is
stuff all taken care of anyway, and ready to go. I've had 'em come here with coyotes that they killed during the winter, and they didn't have time to bring 'em in, and then in the spring, they bring 'em in. Want me to skin 'em -- buy 'em and skin 'em, but I never did too much of that.

EN You weren't much of a gambler then.

BC No, that's their job. That's their job to take care of it, so let 'em take care of 'em.

EN That's what you pay 'em for.

BC That's what they're gettin' paid for.

EN What did you do in your off season when you weren't buyin' fur?

BC Well, went to Seeley Lake and had a good time, went fishin' every other Sunday and maybe middle of the week, and ---

(Mrs. C.) But we opened every day.

BC So that was one nice thing about the fur business. That's some of the attractive things. Let's talk about that a little bit.

EN O.K. O.K. Go ahead. You were gonna talk about the good parts.

END OF TAPE ONE (OH99-11)

BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO (OH99-12)

BC When I came to Goldbergs, the first thing that I did -- we had a terrific shipment of furs to ship to New York. So Goldberg went in the office, and 'is clerk wrote up a draft, sight draft, you know what a sight draft is.

EN No, I don't.

BC Well, you write the draft on the company that authorizes you to do it -- to write the draft -- and you sign your name. That's about all there is to it. And then when it comes in, it has to be honored. And in the meantime, we had express companies those days -- and in the meantime, you shipped the furs out, you got an express receipt showed that it was on the road to New York. You went to the bank and deposited your sight draft the same as a regular check. You got money -- cash. You paid cash and you got cash for your goods. That was the most attractive thing that I saw at that time.
A lota cash and not so much credit.

Well, we didn't have any outstanding accounts. Nobody owed us anything. If you couldn't get together with 'em, you didn't sell it. Waited for the next guy.

You like to fish and stuff?

Oh, yeah. But that was one of the attractive things, and then I liked the fur business, I liked the town, I worked hard on ranches and for myself, and one thing and another, and I just got tired of it -- backin' enough dividends comin' in.

Well, it looks to me like you've taken care to take care of yourself by being wise.

Yeah, there's a good health deal. If you stay in something you like, why it makes you healthy too.

Oh?

I don't think there's anybody that if he likes 'is jobs or likes 'is surroundings, why he wants to stay with it as long as 'e can.

That was an interesting comment you made while I was changin' tapes there; you love the fur business.

Yeah. Well, I did. I loved the fur business. Just something that I more or less specialized in.

I hope that the fur industry continues for a long time.

Well, that's a nice hope. I appreciate that.

It seems some days that it's like the weather outside. It rains all over you, don't it?

Yeah.

If it would be called to mind, do you have any specific, really number one little tidbit story that happened to you while you were buyin' fur, or anything?

Well, I got one that I've always thought of, but I kind-a hate to tell it, 'cause it involves quite a deal, and one thing or another. Maybe I should tell you. But anyway, at one time, the fur dealers in Montana had a reputation of bein' bootleggers.

Let's see -- that was operating ---
BC Operating on illegal fur. So there was a federal agent, a special federal agent. He would-a give his life to-a caught Goldberg with illegal fur.

EN About what time was this? In the '30's and '40's?

BC Yeah, it was in the '30's ... and they tried everything in the world to catch 'em, so that they could get it on us. And one time in particular, they called me from Missoula. Fella said I got a hundred and forty beaver. Goldberg was answerin' the phone and 'e says, "Are they tagged?" And the fella says, "No, they're not tagged." But he says, "You better go down there, Bill, and see what's goin' on, anyway." We had a nice bookkeeper, and I told Gail, I said, "You come and go with me, and we'll go down to Missoula and see what's goin' on down there, and have some fun."

So we went way down below Frenchtown there to the place, and here was five or six fellas out there, and a ladder goin' up in the attic in the house, so we had to climb the ladder to get up in there. So we got up there, and they had their beaver there. But just as luck had it, I recognized one guy in the bunch, and that happened to be this special federal agent. So I went through the beaver and worked on 'em there and sprayed 'em all out, and petted 'em, and I don't know what all I didn't do, and Gail was helpin' me. And they got over in the corner by theirselves, and I whispered to Gail, I says, "You go down that ladder now, and get out-a-here!" So Gail casually worked out, went down the ladder. I always left my checkbook and my scribbing paper in the truck. So I said, "Well, I got to go out in my truck and get some paper here, and figure out what I owe you fellas." And so down the ladder I went. I jumped into the truck, and I said, "Get in, Gail, and let's get the hell out-a here." So we left them up in the attic and we pulled out.

EN So you pulled a good one on 'em, huh?

BC They didn't catch us that time. But they sure would-a liked to.

EN Did you ever have any problems with the laws and things like that?

BC No, no I never had any trouble with the law. I don't think the law had any trouble with me. I always went to the game warden if there was one close at hand, when I went into town, to find out who had beaver -- who had fur. And that way, I kept on the good side of the game warden. They were very nice about it. They'd tell you if so-and-so's got beaver and so-and-so's got coyote. so-and-so's got this and so-and-so's got that. It helped you out because all you had to do was make a circle, and you could take 'er in a hurry, you know.
EN You had pretty good relationship with the Fish and Game, then.

BC Oh, yeah.

(Mrs. C.) Well, they checked our book every year.

BC I always worked with 'em and showed 'em my books and all that, and I had nothing to hide. It was all in the books so that they could see it.

EN They've seen a lot of changes themselves, haven't they? The Fish and Game Department.

(Mrs. C.) You never had trouble with the Federal Government either. And they check the two -- husbands and wives, you know. They come and checked us and checked us and checked us, and they never did come back, which I felt kind good about.

BC But that was one trick that I never appreciated, was tryin' to get me hooked up with a bunch of bootleg beaver and five or six guys there as witnesses so that they'd have the goods on me, you know -- didn't work at all. It didn't work at all.

EN Do you still maintain the Goldberg -- you still have the trademark in your name, right?

BC The corporation? No, I dissolved the corporation. When I quit, I dissolved the corporation.

EN You dissolved the corporation?

BC And I wanted to do that on account of the building. I didn't want-a dissolve the corporation -- or keep the corporation and keep the building in the corporation's name when I got ready to sell out. So I dissolved first, and then sold out.

PAUSE IN TAPING

I guess we forgot to mention how many circulars we sent out once a month during the fur season, but we had a mailing list of about two hundred and fifty thousand, and had sixteen to eighteen girls workin' all the time on those, gettin' 'em ready, gettin' the circular stuff, and they went out every month during the fur season.

EN With prices and things like that on it?

BC Oh, yeah. All the quotations and everything for all the wanted furs.
EN That would be quite a mailing at two hundred and fifty thousand.

BC Yeah. It took thirty days to do it with an average of about eighteen girls.

(Mrs. C.) That was in the early Goldberg days.

EN Oh, that was in the early days when Goldberg was running it? Oh, I see. What'd it cost you to mail those, them days for stamps? A couple-a cents?

BC The permit was free. My mailing permit was free and the postage was a cent and a half on third-class mailing.

(Mrs. C.) And most of the stamps came pre-cancelled, you see.

BC And it took about a week -- about one week -- to count and tie those into bundles, where they went to each town.

EN All over the United States?

BC Practically all over the United States.

EN I'll be danged. If a guy had to mail those today, it'd 'bout break you up in business.

BC Well, I don't think you could afford to do it. Your percentage of receipts on that big a mailing didn't amount to nowheres near what the number of pieces are sent out. .......... although we did have a trapper's list that we bought every year from Minnesota. It run about sixty-four thousand pieces. We got lots-a muskrats. Muskrats would come in by the hundreds. And one time we shipped out muskrats alone, and when you handle one item that way, well you kind-a gotta interest in it and know how much you're sendin' out and how much it amounts to. But there was about eighty thousand rats went out in that one shipment.

EN That was a bunch. Was this in about the '40's?

BC In Minnesota.

EN Oh, in Minnesota.

BC What extras went in there was very, very slim. But there was probably forty or fifty thousand Minnesota rats in that.

(Mrs. C.) About what year, Bill?

BC What year? Oh, down about '34, I imagine. There was lots of trappers those days. Minnesota must-a had lots of
muskrats. And they fooled along and went down and down, the receipts did, until we weren't doin' much more'n fifteen, sixteen thousand rats a year from Minnesota. Probably about forty from the whole circulation.

EN How do you feel about this situation we're in today, with the economy and stuff the way it is? Do you think we'll straighten out?

BC Well, I don't know what your politics are, but I think we've got one of the best presidents we've ever had.

EN President Reagan?

BC Mm-h-mm. And I think the man is tryin' awful hard to git us back on a sound footin'.

EN Do you know that he's the only President that the National Trappers' Association has ever endorsed? That speaks pretty strongly for 'im.

BC I don't doubt it. He's gainin' in popularity all the time, and some of our biggest Democrats in our government is workin' with 'im. That's a good deal.

EN I think the man has got a lot of common sense, you might say.

BC Well, I do too.

(Mrs. C.) He's not afraid to get up. His background was good for him. He's got a personality there that he can win people. I think it'll help 'im.

EN There's a comment Bob Hope made, I was watchin' the television the other night. He says, "All jokes aside", he said about President Reagan, he said, "It took Hollywood to put the best one in there." That's kind of a good remark, I thought. Your wife was saying that Nancy Reagan bought 'erself a mink coat right after they got in office. That was kind-a nice, I thought.

BC Why, sure.

(Mrs. C.) I did too. But people, you know, are saying that killing those little seals, you know, and one thing or another, that people do. 'Course ever since Kennedy went in, she started the leopards, you know, and the spots, and you know when somebody's watching you about something that -- you know, we just can't sit there and not say anything to protect ... our livelihood.

En Did you ever have any disputes with people about your industry? I mean they sayin', "What're you doin' marketing those
BC Oh, once in awhile you run onto somebody that's just a nonbeliever of traps and the methods that's taken to get these furs, but it's not a very big percentage, I don't think.

(Mrs. C.) We never really answered 'em, Bill. We just made up our mind that after all, it was our livelihood, and why should we discuss it, so we didn't discuss it. Any more than somebody kills a cow to eat, I mean -- after all, you know, you kill an animal to eat, so if we kill it for fur, why ---

EN What's the difference?

(Mrs. C.) It does seem cruel to kill the poor little old seal, one thing and another, but, you know they might die anyway.

EN You mentioned your brother was a trapper quite a bit.

BC Yeah, he did more trapping than I did, my brother did. He kind-a stuck to the farm, and they had lots of time in the winter time, and he did quite a bit of trapping.

(Mrs. C.) He still lives in Hamilton.

BC We bought a lot of mink and a lot of furs from my brother.

EN Did he trap for quite a long time?

BC Oh yeah. Oh yeah, probably twenty years, twenty-five years.

EN Grew up in it?

BC Yeah, grew up in it. And there was lots of furs down in that Broadwater County at one time.

EN He stayed back on the farm, then, huh?

BC In those days, skunk was a big item.

EN Oh, in the 30's and '40's?

BC Mm-h-mm.

EN Is that right?

BC Well, big prices.

EN What kind-a price were they bringin'?

BC I don't think they're bringin' too much money. Pretty
hard to get rid of 'em.

EN Today? What were they bringin' back then?

BC Oh, seven, eight, ten dollars.

EN Is that right? That's a lot-a money.

BC Broad stripes, short stripes, blacks, all had a different price. But there was one fella in New York that he bought all the skunk he could buy, and tanned 'em, got 'em ready, the 'e started makin' skunk chubbies. You ever hear of a skunk chubby?

EN No, uh, uh.

BC Well, they're just little short fur. He sold every one of those skunk he had, and I don't know how many he had.

EN Those short waistcoat bands?

BC Then he made 'em into those little short coats and every woman in the country wanted a chubby.

EN How did you like handlin' the skunk hides?

BC Well, that's what I was gonna say. I think the reason now that skunk are not any more in demand than they are, is the fact that it's a problem to take care of 'em -- scrape 'em and clean 'em up and get 'em in shape -- 'cause if you'd ship a bunch-a skunk to New York that wasn't scraped, that wasn't cleaned, they'd throw 'em in the garbage for you.

(Mrs. C.) But if a skunk gets wet, he always stinks.

EN A coat too, stinks when it's wet?

(Mrs. C.) And never gets it out.

EN Oh, I'll be danged.

(Mrs. C.) And that's what happened to the chubbies.

EN Oh, they all got rained on.

(Mrs. C.) He lost a lot of money on those chubbies.

BC And they started makin' mink and all that stuff, and then it passed on. The skunk didn't pass on. But he made an awful, awful lot of money.

EN Did 'e?
Bought that stuff cheap. And 'e controlled the market. That's where he made his money. But he got this chubby thing goin'; why he controlled the market, so he sold the chubbies and had the fur to make 'em.

The market's changed a lot, styles and things like that.

Oh yeah. But it wasn't too stylish. It was just a nice little -- somethin'; like a man's vest is, what it was.

I see.

But if we had rain, it'd stink. If you wore that in the rain, you couldn't go back in the house. They stunk when they got wet. These skunks stunk when it rained.

Yeah, they did stink a little bit when --- some of 'em.

You can't get the smell out of 'em.

Did you ever buy any castors and things like that from beaver or did you just deal strictly in fur?

Castors?

Mm-hmm.

Tons of 'em.

Oh, you did?

Mm-hmm. I wonder what that market's doin'? Do you know?

Doin' real well. They went as high as thirty-five dollars a pound this year, which is a pretty healthy market.

I haven't heard. You don't think of those things. Run over the list, you'd get 'em all in, but just to pop up with the thought of what they take or what they're bringin' and so on, it don't enter your mind at all.

I think they averaged between twenty and twenty-five was the average price, but they did get as high as thirty-two, thirty-five dollars this year, I heard. There just seem to be a terrific jump for 'em all of a sudden, you know. They use those in makin' perfume and stuff. A lotta people don't know that.

Yeah.

Make some fine perfume.
BC Yeah, they use 'em for a base — a perfume base. And there's medicines also that's got castor base in it.

EN Oh, I didn't know that. Human medicine?

BC Oh, yeah. I don't know, I couldn't name 'em off, but there is. There's medicines. Now whether they're internal medicines or external, I wouldn't say about that. But there is certain medicines that use castor for a base.

EN Were there very many fur ranches around in the '30's and '40's?

BC Well, I think that was about when they started, and there was a lot of 'em -- a lot of 'em.

(Mrs. C.) The fox farms.

EN Fox farms and mink farms?

BC Fox farms and mink farms.

EN Were there any close to Helena?

BC Yeah, we had a fox farm up here on Priest's Pass, Priest's Pass Fox Farm. And we had a mink farm over on the other side, and he also raised fitch. Now you know what a fitch is?

EN No, I don't.

BC Well, it's a little animal a good deal like a mink. But the skins didn't bring a great deal of money. But the mink farmer used 'em for food for 'is mink.

EN The carcasses?

BC The carcass.

EN Oh, I see. Were they a native animal, a fitch?

BC Oh, no. I think they come from Germany originally.

EN Oh, I see.

(Mrs. C.) They're kind-a gray. Its hair is more gray.

BC Used to be a few wild ferret around, you know, but I don't think you see them any more.

EN Did you ever buy any wolves or any oddities like that?
Lotta what?

Did you ever buy any wolves in your time?

Wolf?

Mm-hmm.

Oh, yeah. We went and got a wolf from Alaska, and we got wolf from California, believe it or not.

Oh, you did?

Mm-hmm.

I'll be danged.

They were great big skins, and hairy. There was very little fur on 'em.

I'll be danged.

But we were always interested when we got a wolf from California, 'cause they were so dog-gone big.

Did you buy much fox?

Oh, yeah. We bought lots of fox. I bought a lot-a fox here, after I come over here. Valley was full of 'em. There's a kid up at Alder caught one this winter -- a silver. He called me up here a short time ago and told me he had a silver fox, and thought he'd keep it.

They're pretty, aren't they?

Oh yeah, them silvers. They're another thing that takes a lot of grading. A lot-a different colors and different qualities in those fox. They all vary.

You can go anywheres from that cherry red to the silver, and brown fox ....

Nice clear silvers. On those fox farms, they did raise some nice fox.

Did they?

Oh, yeah.

How were their mink? Did you see any?
They did all right on their mink. We had one mink farm over here, and then a big mink farm out of Claysoil. He had a lot-a mink.

(Mrs. C.) And you bought a lot of mink out of Logan. You used to go to Logan and get mink too.

BC Yeah, there was one in Marysville.

(Mrs. C.) At Logan, but we went to Logan and bought the mink too -- Manhattan.

BC Oh, yeah, old man Sullivan. He had good mink; they all had good mink.

EN Then you bought fox and mink -- commercial mink -- too, huh?

(Mrs. C.) Oh, yes. Lots of 'em.

EN Oh, I see. I'll bet that was a job grading them, huh?

BC Well, it was an all-day job, all-night job. You had to go and look at 'em, you started in as soon as you'd get there in the morning, and you had to darn-near finish before you quit. And if he had four, five, six hundred mink, it took you some time to go through 'em.

EN Were they board mink, board-stretched mink?

BC Oh, yeah. Yeah. Some stretched 'em flesh-side out and some stretched 'em flesh-side in. And they had one in Bozeman. He had good mink -- beautiful mink. And this old man Sullivan of Manhattan had beautiful mink. There was a lot of mink farms scattered around; a lot of fox farms. The way these fox in the valley got started here when the long-haired fur went out, why they just opened the gates and turned the fox out.

EN I see. Upped your population, then.

BC Yeah. So we did get nice reds, beautiful crosses, and a mixture of silvers.

EN This was in the drop about in '43 when long fur dropped down.

BC Yeah, along in there. All of it went bad at the same time.

EN How do you like those wire stretchers for fur?

BC Pretty good.

EN You think they do a pretty good Job?
Oh yeah. You got some?

I use wire stretchers for muskrats only.

Yeah. I don't like the mink stretchers, they're too short.

Yeah.

And no way to get a-hold of their hind feet to stretch 'em out.

Right. I see some guys usin' 'em for coyotes too. I don't think they do a good job on coyotes.

Just a good old board shaped right is what you need for a good coyote board.

Tex he told me the way. I think he does a good job on coyotes too — and mink.

Oh yeah. He does a good job on all of his things.

I asked 'im, I says, "Well, Tex, how did you learn how to do that; shape the boards and stuff?" He says, "I'd take the animal and I'd look at what it looked like when it was alive," he says, "And that's what it should look like when you skin it."

Yeah, Tex, he's a good fur man.

It's, funny today, you find so many people that -- again, you know, our trapper population has really jumped in the last three years in Montana. We went from twelve hundred licenses to fifty-two hundred in three years. And most of those guys can't handle fur. It's a lot-a junk on the market. Real poorly-handled stuff.

Yeah. Oh, there is. Lots of it. They're gettin' a lot of fur from different parts of the country and a lot of shipments. Well, we had two or three men workin' on repairin' stuff and fixin' it up, restretchin' it and just any number of things that had to be done to it, and one man would get buried in it. He couldn't handle it at all.

Well, it's kind-a sad when you see a beautiful piece of fur that hasn't been handled right.

There's just lots of beautiful fur ruined.

Well, Bill, we'll shut the machine off there, and I'd like to come back some day in the future and we can continue.
BC    O. K. Any time you come along, why stop in.

END OF TAPE OH99-12