Oral History 365-14

Passport in Time Interviews on the Lewis and Clark National Forest

Interviewees: Jim and Jackie McDonald

Interviewers: Judith Pressmar, Sarah Jaffe

September 18, 1997

Judith: This is an interview with Jim McDonald (and his wife Jackie), at his ranch on Davis Creek north of Geyser, Montana. The date is September 18, 1997. The interviewers are Judith Pressmar and Sarah Jaffe, Passport-In-Time volunteers.

Judith: As a way of starting, would you talk a bit about your background and your beginnings here.

Jim: Well, my Granddad came to this country in 1880, came to Fort Benton, and he hauled logs, and paraphernalia to Great Falls and back, and they unloaded at the river. And then he homesteaded up on Highwood Creek, upper Highwood Creek, I forget the exact date. Then he moved to this side of the Highwoods, on a place at the other end of this mountain over here. And then his family went to Belt to school, then in 1910 he bought this place from a couple German boys, the Sach brothers.

Judith: Sach?

Jim: Yes, Sach, Conrad and John Sach. Anyway, one of them apparently went back to Germany, the other one I don't know where he went, he stayed in the States. So, we'd been incorporated through my granddad and the attorney. The story was that my granddad shipped cattle back to Chicago, well he ran into a couple of gentlemen that wanted to invest in a ranch; the names were Cooper and Hughes. Then my granddad and the attorney in Great Falls by the name of McDonough, they formed this corporation and bought this place from the Sach brothers in 1910. Well anyways, over a few years, they always bought these homesteads because they were going broke and they could not make a living out of it. It takes a lot of acreage to make a living out here for (cattle) carrying capacity. So anyway this place is made up of a lot of little places that went broke and my grandfather bought them.

Well then, our accountant T. C. Ferris had a talk with my granddad one day, "Say, there's something wrong here". Anyway this attorney, McDonough was doing something illegal, so they had a trial. I don't remember any details of it, but anyway he claimed insanity and he ended up in Warm Springs, which is the mental institution in Montana. So from then on, granddad went through the tough depression years. I can remember stories with my Dad, in the 30's, my Dad took me and my little brother when we were in pre-school into Geyser for school, and we
cried and wanted an ice cream cone, he never had a nickel to buy us one, and we cried, stuff like that.

Anyway, my grandfather had only had three boys. They lost one at an early age in his youth, suffering from some disease. But there were two boys and three other girls that my granddad had, and the two boys were working here at the time, and then the older boy wanted to leave, and they bought him a place around the mountain here on Cottonwood Creek. And that's how they separated it. Then my dad had me and my brother and my sister, and then I got to where I had a little money and we bought a place for my brother to live on. And that's how I got here and I'm the third generation.

Judith: On this particular place?

Jim: Right, and then I'm slowly turning it over to my son. He's the youngest of my family; you can see my family on the wall picture there.

Judith: Yes, I was noticing, those are wonderful pictures.

Jim: He's the youngest boy.

Judith: What is his name?

Jim: Lennie. He's president of the Association now, the Highwoods Association. So that will be the fourth generation here, and he's got a son that will probably take over in the future too, hopefully. It's a good place to raise kids. They work with animals; kids get in 4-H, that's good for them, keep them busy.

To go back to the Forest Service, I wrote some things down in my notes here. The Association was formed in 1914 because people in these days took all their cattle up on the Forest Service. I have old records that this ranch had four hundred head put up there.

Judith: This is up in the allotment?

Jim: Yeah. There were no fences. Used to have roundups, and they'd ride plum down, 10 to 15 miles, 10 miles off from here, picking up their cattle, gathering, and then go around the mountain to different cow camps where they used to round up these cattle. Well, then in 1914 they finally decided to form an Association up there, and then they started cutting down the number of cattle that go up there. All I can remember is about back to 1944 when I started riding with the Association. They used to hire a crew of eight boys or men to go up there and round up the cattle in the fall of the year, and that was part of the duties of the Association. And they always hired a man to ride all summer to salt the cattle, and look over them, and push the cattle up the coulees out of the bottoms, and that was the purpose of the rider. And then we rounded up the cattle every fall. So then, '44 was the first year I rode up there, I was pretty young, just out of High School, and I rode for many years up there and in the roundups. And then I got involved
being the President of the Association. They had a meeting every fall, a general meeting, and then an Advisory Committee was elected and they had a meeting in the spring of the year to assess all the members, so much for their herding, so much for this one rider that salted and moved cattle all summer. And they had homemade tents for living and later they got a permit to build a cabin up there, for the cowboys and his rider.

Judith: Who built the cabin then?

Jim: The Association members, and then they had several assessments. They assessed so much for salting, and for round-up fees, to pay the riders. Then sometimes they were accessing for doing fence work, fixing fence and stuff like that. Anyway, since 1950 they used to always go into the mountains with the cattle about the 10th of June. And then in '57 they switched that to later, going in about the 16th of June. And then the Rangers still felt the ranges were being over-grazed, so in 1960 we had an agreement to take a 30% cut over three years, which we did, we agreed with them. Then we started taking rides to look at the range.

Judith: With the Rangers?

Jim: Yeah, with the Rangers, looking at the range. That happened every other year, seemed like. Then in '63, the range looked good after riding and rotating cattle from one place to the other, this was discussed. This Hal Harris, who is from the other side of the mountain, he used to come up the creek from this side and put up in one coulee, come into a coulee, and the cattle would kind of stay there. So we decided, well we'd switch where we put the cattle in, and we put ours in up there cause cattle kind of have a tendency to go towards home, and he'd put up here, that way we could cover the range better because he could work his way toward home. So that worked pretty good for several years, and then switch back again.

I remember one year they (Rangers) kept complaining that on the rides, they would go through these parks, which were really eaten off. They (Rangers) were kind of blaming the rancher's cattle for doing this, and one year I decided lets have a ride before the cattle went on. And it turned out when we did, that these parks were already eaten off by the elk. I forget what year they introduced elk in the Highwoods, I forgot to write it down, but they planned to keep the elk herd at 200 head. Well here in 1966, they counted two hundred and fifty head of elk in the mountains.

In 1965, we started and they wanted us to fence, and that's a terrible job, fencing in those steep Highwoods. Its all by hand carrying posts and digging, so we discussed a lot of things, and we tried developing springs because there's springs in every coulee in these Highwoods. We'd develop springs up high and that really helped, that kept the cattle up there, with the springs to drink, instead of all the way to the creek bottoms. And that's what they (Rangers) were concerned more about, the creek bottoms.

Another bad thing that happened in the Highwoods. Before 1953, there was beaver dams in every coulee, and in 1953 we had very heavy rain clouds set over the Highwoods, and there was
a lot of rain, and then everything started flooding. Dams start breaking down, just a chain reaction in all these coulees, and flooded the town of Highwood out, and all the coulees down there really made a mess. Its been years, and there still is a concern with this one place on the North Fork in the Highwoods. It washed all this gravel down there and there was never no grass, and they were concerned the cattle were sitting there all the time. They finally fenced it off here a couple years ago, and it's very slowly coming back to grass.

We had this one rider, he was born in the Highwoods, Dan Dupea. He was our rider, he rode every year; he took care of our herd of cattle up there. He was a wonderful guy because he was always looking on the ground and if he seen a weed he'd pull it. And I can remember one year, I don't remember what year it was, but a Ranger said that he was concerned that there was a lot of this shrubby cinquefoil showing up, and that's a sign of overgrazing. So I said, "How about spraying, it wouldn't be much to take a backpack there one time with you and spray it?" "No, you can't spray on the forest". After that, this was a few years later, I see all this knapweed over in the western mountains and it (no spraying) was a policy then, and it was the wrong policy. But they're spraying now because there's spurges showing up here, and knapweed, and some other stuff.

Judith: You have the knapweed here now?

Jim: Not here, we had a few patches, but we sprayed it off. And we have spurge that we fight every year, we just have to go back every year and spray, plants still keep coming up. So anyway, he was very good, and he was in his 80's when he finally died, and we lost our rider. The riders since then haven't been as observant as he was.

Judith: Dupea, that would be French, was he a local person?

Jim: Yeah, he lived over on Shonkin, he'd come out and work for Strand during the winter, Oswald Strand Ranch, and then come back in time to ride, take care of the cattle in the mountains back here. Always had 2 or 3 horses and worked real well.

Judith: I had a question about your grandfather, where was he from before coming here?

Jim: Prince Edward Island, yeah, him and a cousin of his, we just found this story out. My kids gave us a gift to go back to Prince Edward Island for our fiftieth wedding anniversary, so we went back there and found some relatives, my great granddad's brother's niece. Found her and had a nice visit, it was kind of remarkable to go back there. She had been a McDonald, and she married a McDonald! She had the same laugh or giggle as one of my aunts had, and also my brother and sisters, it was familiar. See that barn over there, that big horse barn? 'Pert near' all the barns over there are built the same way, it's kind of fascinating to come here with his ideas how to build that barn.

Judith: Your granddad built that particular barn?
Jim: Oh yes, and when he first started, he was going with some sheep. And they got a band of lambing sheep, he took off over the hill with them, they'd built that shed for the sheep. Anyway, it was getting late at night and he wasn't showing up with the sheep, so my Dad and his brother got on horses and went out to look for them. He (granddad) said "Give me a horse with these damn sheep!", he had no idea how to herd them. Dad said he went out and he said he took some books because he thought he'd have time to read and here these sheep were moving all the time. So they finally got a sheep herder, hired a regular sheep herder to come, and he herded them. He asked this shepherder, "How do you keep ahead of them, how do you do that?" "Well" he said, "with dogs, you send the dogs out, a dog can turn them all day". Anyway it was kind of interesting.

Judith: So did your Dad get dogs after that?

Jim: No they just hired shepherders that had dogs. And they didn't keep sheep very long because they had some weed out there that was killing the sheep, so they only had them for two or three years, I think is what they said, and then they went to cattle. I remember Dad telling about these dry years in the Depression, when he used to cut willows to try to feed the cattle, and he says, "I can still hear them cows bawling at night because there so hungry". And I can remember, I was just a little kid, they tried to sow some rye for hay. It grows tall and tough, and it was just awful to stack cause it was so slick. They used loose hay stacks, you'd be up there to build it, and you would slide off, they had a lot of problems. We used horses here to put up hay.

Judith: That was '48, '49 then?

Jim: Oh, '48 I guess. Then we started getting modern, getting some balers, and machinery like that.

Judith: Costs a lot more money doesn't it!

Jim: Oh boy, I tell you, that machinery just keeps going up. It keeps going up and up and the price of cattle doesn't seem like it keeps up! So anyway, to get back to the mountains, we started developing these springs, and ended up by the fall of '83 we had developed 33 springs in the Highwoods. And they (Forest Service) tried dust bags so the cattle would stay on the ridges, but the cattle didn't bother them, they just went back to the timber for shade, so it didn't seem to work. And in '81 they started spraying weeds.

Judith: What would they have been spraying with then, do you know?

Jim: According to the news, they contacted the Chouteau county commissioner see if they could get a crew to come up and spray this knapweed that was on the Shonkin side. I don't know what they used. Then in '85 they tried a new management plan, a Five Year Plan. I know we said we'd move our cattle from here, to go to Shonkin for certain pasture. They had a plan to keep this one area ungrazed and they had some places they wanted to burn, so they did that over a five-year period and then finally went back to the original plan. And I don't know what date it
was, it was after I'd got out of the Presidency, but they went and moved our 'on-date' to July, so now we go in the 4th or 5th of July now. After we started doing that, there seemed to be a lot more grass.

Then they (Forest Service) finally upset the Fish and Game because they were trying to keep these elk herd down in everybody's management plan, when we had a lot of elk up here grazing. After all the permittees talked to us from around the mountains, they all had elk and it ended up to be over 600 head in there, you know. So that didn't help with the grazing situation. We had an awful time, well I did, trying to get the Fish and Game to issue cow permits. "No they couldn't do that, it had to be bulls or either sex". I said "Well, you can't cut a herd if you don't kill some cows". So the last few years they starting issuing cow permits and they seem to be holding them down, I think the herd is around 400 now, still.

Judith: Still quite a few?

Jim: Yeah. Trying to maintain 200, jump to 600, and now back to 400, is not good!

Judith: And how many cows would you be putting up there?

Jim: Right now? Well, they go on AUM's now, and they let some people go in 10 days early, you know, with a regular permit. And then we go in with, oh it used to be 60 head, now its 70 because we wait until the 10th of July to go in, they gave us a few more cows to make the same AUM's, so it works about the same in both, or you go in early. But it seems to be working better now, there seems to be a lot of feed.

In '96, no two years ago ('95), we had a field day up there, and we had the Fish and Game, Forest Service officials and any ranchers that wanted to come. Anyway, the Fish and Game was here to count the elk around here, and they counted 146 elk up here. We had one pasture up here we hadn't grazed; we never put the cattle in there, it's an off and on permit, we never put cattle in that area for fourteen months, so they had this field review to look at it. They had the expert from the college, a Mr. Knight, and a couple other experts anyway up there, and he showed everybody how the elk are really raising heck in there. You know they (Forest Service) gave us rancher’s hell for riparian areas and how they look, well he took us down to the creek and says "These elk are keeping these willows cleaned up, they ain't growing at all".

So it isn't us (ranchers) really, and I never noticed before, he says. "The elk like quaker aspen mass", 'Quakers' they call them. So anyway he said; "If you find some around up there, go up and cut a bunch of them down and the shoots will come up, and they stick around there", but we don't have that (quaker patches). But I never noticed before, until after this meeting, that we got two patches of Quakers up there, and it looks like a shade, because all the leaves are gone at a certain height! So that’s interesting to see that.

We used to have 15 - 20 elk in here in the winter time, and now there's a 150 you know. And we always let people hunt here, and it got awful tough. When they first started they wouldn't
even ask permission, they just go up and we had an awful time, we had a lot of those cases. Eventually we started having them check in here. Well, at 4:30 AM in the morning they'd be out there with lights on and pickup running, wanting to get permission to go, and you have to get up. And then finally we went to putting a sign up that they could get permits a certain time in the morning or in the evening, or the day before if they wanted to hunt, and started issuing permits. And from there it worked pretty good you know, we didn't really get bothered.

Well one year, we were trying to get a little compensation for using our grass up here, paying for the elk you know, and I decided it would be easier on the hunters if they gave me ten dollars for a deer or twenty for an elk if they got it. And that seemed like it was going to work, but then there's some hunters they hunt right off to the road and don't pay. Anyway, then Fish and Game come in one day and says; "You can't do that, your selling game. You can ask them in and charge them twenty dollars for a cup of coffee", and I said "Hell I ain't going to entertain them, I ain't got time, I got a lot of work to do".

Judith: So can you charge them just for using the land?

Jim: No, and we finally went to this Block Management, and now they (Fish and Game) are paying us some money. They used to call here and the son's for appointments and for days and times, it got so I and my son would get so many, and we'd have too many and we'd have lost money for the day. So I finally turned it over to him and now he's taking care of it, phones always ringing off the hook, especially after the elk drawing. They draw for the elk you know, and we know when the elk drawing is out because the phone just rings, all trying to get the dates when they can hunt.

Judith: So does your family do any elk hunting up there?

Jim: I've never hunted in my life!

Mrs. McDonald: Our grandson, he's hunted, he got his first deer last year. And our son has put in for landowner preference, and he never gets a permit and he's really upset about that, and he wants his son to get it. So he put in for himself and for his son this year and neither one got it. He wants to get a deer, but he'd like to get an elk too.

Jim: I guess I just live too close to the game to hunt them, and I just don't have time sometimes. In fact one hunter give Jackie an antelope roast, and we couldn't eat it.

Mrs. McDonald: Antelope roast, well it had spoiled. I fixed it for supper, and that's when the kids were all home yet and right away they noticed the difference in the taste!

Jim: Any other questions? I'd be willing to answer, that's about it far as I can recall.

Judith: Did you know any of the Forest Rangers personally?
Jim: Oh yeah, we always met during our meetings you know, and the earlier ones, we enjoyed them, because this one ranger used to ride with us on the roundup for a few days and look at the range. But then he retired and passed away.

Mrs. McDonald: Made for better relationships.

Judith: What was his name?

Jim: Doc, Doc Cornell they called him, I don't know what his first name was.

Judith: And do you know approximately how long he was in the area?

Jim: Oh, he was here about six years, something like that, not sure, maybe more, time flies. But these younger Rangers now ain't up to riding horses I guess.

Mrs. McDonald: You don't have that much personal contact with them anymore, we know the Game Wardens more than we do the Rangers.

Jim: I don't (have much contact). Lennie would, since he's the President. We used to have to go over to the Highwoods, one of the ranchers over there, to have our meetings, at the Secretary's place, Margie Grey. Now they come here for the meeting so the Rangers would come up here from Stanford, a little closer for them too for the meetings. And they're here for the general meeting in the fall and the advisor board meeting in the spring, so, any problems come up they try to work them out. But the Association has worked really good with the Forest Service over all these years you know, and worked out a lot of problems. It's worked pretty well. I don't have any idea how they get along with individuals from different places.

Judith: I guess it depends a lot on the individuals.

Mrs. McDonald: Well we're one of the few that allow even Block Management, who allow hunters on their property.

Jim: Yeah. I know sometimes during gun season, that's when the elk start moving, and they come around the mountain. This guy from back east bought this place around the mountain from here, and he got on there because he was a hunter and the guy let him on and then he bought the place, and now he won't let anybody hunt. And the Strand ranch over here had a disagreement with him, and with Fish and Game once, and so they won't let anybody hunt, only a few people they know and that's it. So all the elk get chased out of here and they run right around the mountain down into Strands, then come back in the winter time! So it's kind of a tough deal.

Judith: In your times up in the mountains, did you ever come across any old cabins, old lookout, anything like that?
Jim: Oh, no. The Forest Service had exclosures they put out, for checking what wild game ate and the cattle ate, and then where nothing ate. They had one of them put in next to the campground up by Thain Creek over here in the Highwoods, they had it right next to the campgrounds and they had this area excluded from the cattle, and where the elk and deer could use it, right next to the campground. With the campers up there all summer, I wouldn't think there'd be game around to have a fair test. But some others they had away from the public and I think it worked a lot better for their analysis.

Mrs. McDonald: Isn't there a lookout up there on Baldy?

Jim: No that’s just a stake, and something for radio and television, on Baldy.

Mrs. McDonald: Didn't they have any lookouts in the Highwoods?

Jim: No. Another thing that's happened, for fire season you know, the Forest Service used to have contracts for firefighting, I know I was one, and they had ones around the mountain. If we saw a fire, they had the fire boxes here for us, and we had permission to hire four or five guys to go up there. Well I thought it worked real well, because you’d get up there on the fire and get it out before it got big, and then they come in and clean it up, but they’ve stopped that now. I think if a fire was to start up here now, by the time they get up here, it would get out of control. So that's one thing I was disappointed in, because you know, us ranchers, we don't like fire, and we're closer and can get right on it.

Judith: Did you observe any Indian rings?

Jim: Oh yes, they're on private property down here. I could show them to you if you wish. They're down in the field, I see them all the time. Used to be a town down here, "Knerville" they called it. If you want more funny stories, . . . . there's a cement basement up here, my granddad called it the Kenny place. And he built a beautiful home up there, I don't know how they made the cement basement and stuff, but he'd go to town and he'd get loaded and the story was he'd go through all his gates coming home, never stop, he was drunk you know. Next day he'd go back and fix them all! Then there was a guy at what we call the Simpson place, his name was Hip Simpson, used to be a mail carrier, and he had horses, all he had was horses. He couldn't hold his horses, prancing and trying to go, you know, and my granddad told the story that he (Simpson) would come by with the mail and sometimes he'd be on a drunk, and he'd be sitting there on the wagon, and the horses would come up to the mailbox and stop, people would run up and get their mail, then clap, and the horses would walk along to the next one. But when he was sober, he couldn't hold them, oh he'd pull that harness and them horses would be prancing.

But I sure could show you some Indian rings.

Mrs. McDonald: This ranch is made of smaller places, it's the same with all bigger ranches, we have the Kenny place, we have the Simpson place, we have the Johnson place, and another place,
and those were all little ranches, a part of our ranch. Jim's grandfather keep buying out little
places that adjoined us. So that's how we identify our property, by place name.

Judith: Makes sense. Well how about any old trails or anything up in the mountains that you've
seen?

Jim: Well there used to be a forest trail up over this pass, but it's kind of grown over now.

Judith: When would that have gone in?

Jim: Oh, before my day, I think when they put that in, a horse trail.

Mrs. McDonald: Over the Shonkin Divide into Highwood Creek I think, into Thain Creek.

Judith: And what would they have used that for?

Mrs. McDonald: Packing with packhorses.

Jim: Short cut I think, but it's too steep to put cattle over. This side of the mountains are
awfully steep, and you can't go over with cattle, but the other side works pretty good, more
gentle but still steep. There's a lot of grass in these mountains and there's 'pert near' a spring in
every coulee, which makes good high range country.

Another thing we found out, they (Forest Service) had asked us go on a tour where they have
rotation grazing, they wanted us to do it too you know. Went over here to White Sulphur
Springs, I forget the name of the range of mountains, than over to Townsend to look at one.
They'd been in it a few years and the permits had the permitties a little upset because sometimes
they were supposed to go to the high country the first of this year, no grass up there! They didn't
think it worked that good you know, because the grass starts at a warmer climate and gradually
goes up so, they had a different rotation set to go this year. That's why we went to placing
springs in the same drainage and going on later, it makes a difference in the grass all right.

Judith: I'm sure it does. Well to get away from the Forest Service a bit, can you tell us a bit
about what life was like growing up in this area?

Jim: I thought it was great. I always enjoyed it, we were the only kids here at the time in this
area. We went to school in Geyser, then one year they had school about four miles over here and
we went there one year, which I think I was only in fourth grade. That year at Geyser they had
an epidemic of scarlet fever so we were lucky to be out in the country.

Mrs. McDonald: Everything was produced on the ranch, turkeys and pigs and chickens, and on.

Jim: Yeah, we had chickens and in the summertime we'd always had a few sheep around, for
mutton you know. It's this house here my granddad had built, we bought this place and the
original house is there, and you can see how thick that wall is there. The logs are still in there. Then he built this part with the basement and then two stories.

Mrs. McDonald: The log house had two stories?

Jim: Yeah. There's a spring up here, very close, and very good spring water. He had coils of pipe going back and forth and water was running through it, for refrigeration. And they had what they called carbide lights, there used to be carbide lights here. Then he put in a telephone.

Judith: When would that have been?

Jim: Installed carbide lights all through the '40's, after the 40's.

Judith: Do you have any idea when the original part of the house might have been built?

Mrs. McDonald: In the 1880's, right?

Jim: In the 1880's sometime, I was trying to think when.

Judith: And then when would your granddad have put this section in?

Jim: 1910 or shortly after 1910. Anyway, he had put this telephone in, well everybody started calling up when he was busy, to give messages to our neighbors. He got tired of being everyone's messenger, so he pulled out all the wire and rolled it up!

Judith: He pulled it out?

Jim: Yeah. And we just sent in a bunch of junk to Great Falls here a couple of years ago, a big roll of telephone wire, you know, all rolled up.

Judith: So when did you get a telephone then again, what year?

Jim: Oh, gosh we used to have to go to Geyser to make a phone call. The REA put it in.

Mrs. McDonald: The 1950's.

Jim: It was in the '50's wasn't it, because I remember the day the kids out here got on the phone and wouldn't get off, it was a party line then.

Judith: So how about electricity, when did you get electricity?

Jim: My granddad, or my Dad, put in a 32 volt system in the windmill out here. And we had lights.

Jim and Jackie McDonald Interview, OH 365-14, Archives & Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, The University of Montana-Missoula
Jim: Well I know the telephone was in the '50's because I remember the kids on it. Couldn't get on because of the party line you know, kids were talking to each other.

Mrs. McDonald: We had electricity when they built our house for us, didn't we? So that was 1944, so it was probably 1940's, early 1940's.

Jim: Yeah, but before that we had 32 volt.

Judith: You mentioned going to school up here in Geyser. Do you remember the name of the school?

Jim: Oh, just Geyser Public School. They built a new grade school, they built a new building on the end of that. I used to stay in town with an aunt of mine, us kids.

Mrs. McDonald: They didn't go back and forth, they didn't have bus service. Our kids were going to a little country school on the creek down here. It's a mile down and, well they hired a man, he drove his own car for a couple of years, to take the children to school. The kids have been back and forth. They only had, oh about six kids and then they got a bus.

Judith: So what was the name of that country school?

Jim: Mansfield School.

Judith: So about what years was that being used?

Mrs. McDonald: Let's see, 1950, could have been going a couple of years before that.

Jim: Our kids only went to school there for four years wasn't it?

Mrs. McDonald: Three years.

Judith: Is it still in use now?

Mrs. McDonald: No, the buildings are long gone.

Judith: Was it torn down or moved?

Mrs. McDonald: A guy moved it into Geyser, it's a storage building now. Had a little teachereage connected to it and a woman lived there. It probably was in use four or five years cause we had three teachers, had a man teacher, an old man from Belt that was retired, hard to get teachers to come out to the country.

Judith: Yes. So you went to school in Geyser all through high school?
Jim: All through the sophomore year, and then my Dad had took me out and put me in school at Stanford and I graduated from there.

Judith: So did you stay in Stanford while you were going to school there?

Jim: Yeah, my mother moved down there.

Judith: So she would stay there with you during the school year? That must have been very difficult for families to be split up like that, so the children could go to school.

Mrs. McDonald: Yes, well its like now, I think there is 27 kids in that Geyser High School, four grades but not full classes, and they get a lot of attention but they don't get the extra curricular things. So now we have this family growing of ours up here, four children and history might repeat itself, they might have to move to town to Stanford.

Jim: The reason we moved our youngest kid down there, several of us parents went to the school board, asking the board to not rehire the superintendent because he wasn't doing the job, and they went and give him the job! All the teachers left too!

Mrs. McDonald: We had never gone to a School Board meeting, we went four times, and it didn't make any difference, several of us were there. Seven teachers quit!

Jim: So anyway we moved our youngest to Stanford. Jackie had to move down there so he could play sports.

Mrs. McDonald: We had a little house down there, we moved in there.

What was that you asked me, if I was familiar with some plan? I don't remember what you said, that was your first question. Is it what you're doing now?

Judith: Oh, with the Partners (PassPort)-In-Time program. Yes, it's a program that the Forest Service has created to enlist the aid of volunteers to do various history projects. It can be anything from oral history to an archeological dig, just trying to get things done for less money and it's also an opportunity for people like us to do things that are interesting to us. I don't know when they started the program, but it's been around for a number of years now, people come from all over the country and there are programs all over the country.

Mrs. McDonald: So what do you do with your information?

Judith: These tapes will be transcribed and you'll get a copy of the tape and a copy of the transcript to edit, to make any corrections, or changes, or deletions that you wish. And then those will be incorporated and you'll get a final transcript, and the tapes will be kept on file at the Forest Service and will be available to the public and I know that Kelly Keim, who's out of Stanford office, is going to be doing a report on this particular project. But that's the extent of it.
to my knowledge at this time, I know they'd like to do more, funds are always short, but I would hope that the information would be available in the museum there.

Jim: For the oral history, it was Jim Thain that started this Association up there. They used to run horses up there too, and they run sheep too, some outfits. But with this Jim Thain, they said that on one of these ridges up there he used to cut hay for their cattle, and he left his mowing machine up there, and they called it 'Mowing Machine Ridge'. That's still with us, and when they ride in the roundup, someone will say 'Well, you cover 'Mowing Machine Ridge'.

Judith: So is it still there?

Jim: No, the implements' not there today. It was awfully steep to get up there and he probably just left it then. I imagine it was a horse mower, and had the horses pull it.

Judith: So they ran horses up on the ridge?

Jim: Oh yeah. I should go over to Amy's and get that (family history) record.

Mrs. McDonald: Mrs. Fergus was her name and they came up the Missouri River on the steamboat Josephine, the paddleboat. She lived in Fort Benton for the winter, I think it was, and came out here and settled, they homesteaded here, she with her daughters. And then Jim's grandfather married one of the daughters and they lived here, one lived over the mountain, the four daughters were always close, one lived in Belt. It was something I can remember when I first came here, the two of the daughters. Jim's grandmother was bed ridden at the time and her daughter was taking care of her. The two sisters, her two sisters, would walk up every day. Their was a little trail between the two of us, and every day the two old ladies came up two visit the one that was bed ridden. She couldn't talk, you know, but they made that trek every day to see her, and then she died and they died. Jim's grandparents were still living here, and when they died we moved into this house. But that's not Forest Service history.

Judith: Well you know, it's been interesting for us, we've talked mostly to men, and we've said 'We'd like to talk to some women and find out what it was like for the women'.

Mrs. McDonald: Yes, it was really tough. You know, on the ranches at that time, they did all this work with horses and men, lots of men. And Jim's aunt lived here, the one that was taking care of her mother, and the work you had to do! Usually in the summer time they'd get a girl to help, with the cooking and all the cleaning and all of that because there was so much work, so many men to feed, big meals to get every day, three times a day! You know, all the food -- you produced, and like all the vegetables from the garden you had all that cleaning to do, all the vegetables, then all the cooking, and all the bread and pie baking. They worked awfully hard, we don' know how hard! I worked hard when I first got married, but I didn't have a big crew to feed.

Judith: So what would a typical meal have been then?
Mrs. McDonald: Oh, all three meals were big meals. You know, breakfast the ordinary foods….

Judith: So what would be ordinary foods?

Mrs. McDonald: Well, pancakes, eggs, and bacon, and sausage. And dinner or the main meal, was always at noon, but that was our big meal. Then the evening meal, if you had enough cooked at noon you had some leftovers, but if you didn't you started from scratch again! It was a lot of work.

Judith: Who would do the laundry? Would people in the house have to do laundry for the hands?

Mrs. McDonald: Yes, we did. They had a shower in the basement here, that little house right down there that you can see was for the hired hands, the bunkhouse they called it. And that didn't have any heat in the winter, so in the winter the men that were there lived in the house here also, but they did their showers downstairs. But the mother of the woman that lived here did the cooking, the washing and ironing for those men. And in the summertime they had more men than they usually did through the winter.

Jim: They only had one or two in the winter time, they hayed the cows, they used horses then you know and pitch fork.

Judith: And how many would there be in the summer?

Mrs. McDonald: Eight or ten.

Jim: Eight not counting ourselves.

Mrs. McDonald: Well, there'd be you and your Dad, your brother, and grandfather.

Jim: My grandpa didn't do much then.

Mrs. McDonald: Well, when he was younger, he did. One funny story from Jim's aunt, of course every woman, every ranch wife baked their own bread and all that you know. Well she was always getting after granddad because he was coming in and snitching the bread to go out and feed the turkeys, and the chickens. She'd get upset with him sneaking her bread out to feed the turkeys.

Jim: He was quite a guy. My brother and I used to play some independent ball, basketball, and sometimes the games would be early in the morning, well we'd feed in the dark before we left, we'd get granddad up and he'd go with us you know. His daughter who was living here would say "What are you doing!" and he'd say "I'm going to the basketball game!". "You're too old
to be going!"  "No. I'm not!". And then we got down there to this one ball game, it was in the
evening, we were playing, and Dad told the story that my granddad got up and started down to
the floor, and Dad says "Where you going?", and granddad says "Looks like there's going to be
fight down there, and Jim and Jack are too young to be fighting, I'm headed down there!"

Judith: So did he enjoy going with you?

Jim: Yeah, we had a lot of good memories.

Judith: So what kinds of things when you were growing up did you do for fun?

Jim: Oh, just played ball.

Mrs. McDonald: Jim's aunt that lived here and one of the hired men that lived here year around,
Jim and I and her and him, we played bridge every night, every night we'd play bridge. We'd
have little tournaments, one's and two's, one that won would have to furnish the desert
afterwards! That was our entertainment, and reading, and listening to the radio, that was all.

(Tape Change)

Jim: One year my aunt was busy, making white Christmas soap flakes to string up for the
Christmas tree, and she had been making that white Christmas candy, divinity. And the hired
man came in and he thought she was making divinity and took a mouthful of the white soap!
She never stopped him!

And then the faucet from the spring here, men used to come in from haying and wash outside in
pans and stuff, and they always hired a girl in the summertime to help cook, and there were a lot
of water fights around here. Someone would throw water out on the men, then the water fight
would be on.

Judith: A good way to cool off.

Jim: Yeah. Going back this old Forest Service grazing statement, back in 1918, shows a
complete list of all the permittees at that time. There's my Dad with 400 head, here's horses 10-
10-40-20..........

Judith: It shows no horses then for you?

Jim: No, we were all cattle. Then it cuts back to 60 for awhile! Anyway, I just found these, the
grandson kind of looked through these. The Association was organized there in 1914, Charley
Stevens was the President, James Thain was the Secretary-Treasurer.

Judith: I'm sure the Forest Service would appreciate a copy of this if you don't mind.
Jim: Oh they don't have one?

Judith: I wouldn't count on it, they may.

Jim: Well if you want to take this down to copy it, you sure can. Also in 1915, sounds like they had a wolf bounty put up to kill some wolves, and they paid $340 for 5 grown wolves and 19 pups. The bunkhouse used to be right out here in the early days, and we had a picture of a dead wolf with a bunch of dead pups. My granddad told me about these trappers, had a lot of nerve, they'd go up to the dens with wolves, one of them would go in and spook the mother wolf out, and he'd bring out the pups. Well, that wolf had to run over the top of him to get out you know!

We had a lot of problems with wolves, in fact that White Wolf in Stanford, used to make a big circle, go to Big Sandy, would come through here once in a while. Dad said he could remember that (looking up at the hillside), he wondered where that white steer come from, he looked that big up with the cattle. This wolf would follow them down to their wagon, they'd come home with the wagon after feeding the cattle up there. He went out here someplace to a certain rock where they'd seen him, he was gone, so they thought "Well, we'll put a trap there!" So they set a trap, put in by this rock, and probably a couple months later here this wolf comes, and steps in the trap. And the dam trap was froze down, and didn't spring, it set there so long! But it was shortly after that sometime, the guy shot that wolf.

Judith: When was the last of wolves you saw around here?

Jim: I never saw them, my Dad had, it happened in the late '20's, early 30's I suppose. Then coyotes got so bad, one year in my time, we had heifers up here, had them up here close and when they started calving we'd bring them down, but before they came down, here a heifer was having trouble and by the time we got up there, we noticed her down, she'd have trouble calving, and the calf was half eaten.

Judith: Coyotes, or mountain lions?

Jim: Coyotes, but there's a few cats around here too. A few years ago we had an elk hunter up here, he got his elk and took half out, wrapped the other half or something, talking with him later that night, he asked if he come back early in the morning to get it, I said sure. Next day he went up and here it was uncovered and dragged away. He knew it had to be a cat to do that. Then there's a few goats up here now, this time of year.

Judith: Where would they be?

Jim: Well, Jackie used to sit here and see them up in them rocks up there, with field glasses. But they planted them on Square Butte, and then they moved over in the Thain Creek area. About three weeks before school started, my son and his wife went up right after dinner, they wanted to climb this Arrow Peak, and they saw a nanny and two kids down low. It was quite
something to see. We kept the youngest one here, the little one, she's the 4 year old. We babysat.

Well, I'll see what else I can find for you here. My son went through this. In 1916 we paid $15 to Robert Vant to furnish work on cabin, so that must be when they built the cabin on the Highwood side.

Judith: Was there a name for that cabin?

Jim: We always called it Cow Camp. In 1920, they tried to hire a trapper for the Shonkin side, and that's when the Shonkin people wanted to join the Highwood Association, in 1922.

Judith: What would they have been trapping for?

Jim: Wolves. Very seldom see bears up here, ain't enough berries and stuff. Did see one once, when I was riding one time, and it didn't stick around. In 1924, they built the cabin in Shonkin, the Cow Camp, probably by the permittees. In fact I was going through all of these notices, and the Forest Service wanted us to build a fence around a recreation area in the Highwoods. We probably should have done it, we didn't. See, they hire these kids from out of town in the summer time to do these things, they don't know how to fence, and wires are loose and stuff. It's nice they hire them I guess.

In 1926 'the Advisory Board authorized to take measures to best handle the ox situation'. We might be better off if you read out of this, I mean it might be interesting for the history, that Lennie has highlighted. See, there's history every year, like they repaired corral one year, and all. We went through all the minutes one day and highlighted all this. I just run on to this, maybe you can read it.

Sarah: May 6, 1922, 'Shonkin wants to join'. May 27, 1923, 'Shonkin joins', April 8, 1924, 'Four pups and paid $40' January 26, 1924 'Moved and Seconded to build Shonkin on Middle Fork of Shonkin Creek', January 23, 1926 'Advisory Board authorized to take measures to best handle elk station', 'Moved that US Biological Survey furnish a permanent trapper in the Highwoods', January 22, 1927 "Moved to exterminate the surplus elk and provide roundup riders and two horses at $5/day", April 18, 1955 "Assess 45 cents for the roundup, $1.25 herding, 20 cents salt, 50 cents building built addition onto South Fork Cabin'.

Jim: That's per head, whatever number of cows you had on is how much per head you had to pay. Registration was in April. So everyone in the Association would have been assessed per head.

Sarah: Here's two more entries, "Report on completion on cattle corral on Shonkin", April 24, 1958 'Repair and improve Shonkin Cabin, concrete and repair corral', January 26, 1959 'Moved to build corral and loading chute at Napa Smith lands on Stevenson land'.
This really chronicles all that information.

Mrs. McDonald: Here's 1914, 1915, did you read those? 'First meeting to organize', 1914, that's interesting.

Judith: So when did you come here Jackie, and where were you before?

Mrs. McDonald: 1944, from Stanford. Who is Charles Stevens, the President? Vice-President was John Reynolds, or Juels Reynolds.

Jim: And we're still together! Oh, he was probably a great grandfather to John Stevens.

Judith: Can you think of any other interesting times, or stories?

Sarah: What did you folks do for entertainment before you were married? I know you said you played bridge.

Mrs. McDonald: Well, summer times, they had 'basket socials', not a lot of dances, we didn't go very often.

Judith: So what would a 'basket social'?

Mrs. McDonald: We'd have a dance at our little school down here, you'd fix a food basket like for a family or for a couple, and then you'd decorate your basket, and the guys would bid on it, and whoever bought your basket you'd have to eat with them, whether you liked them or not!, and there'd be a dance. Of course a lot of those things went on before Jim and I were old enough, you know, and I don't image these were very often as people had to travel those years in Model T's or horse and buggy.

Jim: My Dad was great at pulling tricks on new men, or even strangers who might come in. He'd say "We're going to have a badger fight tonight, did you hear about them?" Badgers can be vicious. So anyway they'd talk this all up you know, he'd go over and bring the badger over, which wasn't a badger, but it would be all covered up in a sack and had a rope on it in a box, but it was just a chamber pot, had water in it and had a rope on it and a sack over the end of it. Had the dog there you know, and men were making bets, "Who's gonna win, the dog or the badger!", then get this guy to pull it out, "Gotta give it a good jerk you know!", and here it was nothing but a chamber pot and a bunch of water! Might get a little water on him!

Then he always had 'Pull three men on the stick'. Anyway he'd have a big stick here, and three guys over there, and he'd be on this side and put his feet against the guy in the middle. These other guys they'd be pulling, they'd start pulling and then fly over back-wards because Dad would turn lose. He'd say "Oh, my hand slipped". Sometimes Dad would do it 2 or 3 times before the guys caught on.
In the summertime after haying, he always had a crew down here, and we used to play baseball down here in the field. Built a backstop here, and that was about all for entertainment.

Judith: How did you two meet?

Mrs. McDonald: In high school. Another thing they used to do, was ride calves and ride the milk cows out of the barn after milking, that was the end of the milk! Little things like that. The summers were nice, the days were long, winter was the hard time, darker and so cold.

Jim: I was just out of high school, and it seemed like it would take all day to feed these cows. Have to use horses, saddle and feed them, and go with the hired man to go way up a couple of miles to feed the cows, or down here and feed some calves, seemed like we were pitching hay all day. We always liked windy days, you get along the stack and pitch the hay, the wind kind of helps you as you rotor it to the cows. Some days it was so cold, someone would say "Man, let's warm these up", and we'd start a little hay on fire and warm the handles of the pitchfork. It actually didn't do any good, but you know,.....

Mrs. McDonald: In the Second World War, Jim was drafted, there were four drafted at the same time, three of them were ranchers, and Jim was already to go. I'd moved to town already, and then one of the ranchers parents, Dad of one of the kids, had went to the local draft board and insisted that his boy not go because he was needed on the ranch. Well, the draft board said "Well ok, if we're going to let this kid stay home, we're going to let the other two ranchers stay home, so he didn't get to go. Jim always wished he'd have gone, do his duty, then that was the thing that shut out of going to college because he didn't have the G.I. college help.

We had a kid here my Dad hired from Missouri, I kind of grow up with him through high school, we'd draw a dollar from Dad to go to the dance, 50 cents for the dance and 2-bits for supper, if you had a girl you could go to the dance for $1 you know. And that was in the '40's. Tough times you know, but we lived through them.

Judith: Any particular bad winters that you can remember?

Mrs. McDonald: We always had drifted roads, we'd be drifted in for two weeks at a time. We don't have those kind of winters any more.

Jim: I remember once I was worried about the cattle, we had a little jeep then, had a regular blizzard. I went up there to see if the cows were drifted up against the fence. I was driving along and I thought I knew where I was at and all of a sudden here I was nose down in a little coulee, stuck. I had to walk home a couple of miles in the storm, stuff like that you know. But we've been pretty fortunate here. We're in an area surrounded by this basin here, drive about 4 miles and it will be blowing about a 100 miles per hour, but it will be calm here.

I can remember one time my brother and I, and my Dad and Mother, we had the jeep in town, they wanted to see the ball game, we were in Great Falls to play independent ball, and we got
back to Geyser and the wind was blowing terrible. Dad and Mother decided they were going back to Great Falls on the highway. Jack and I we had to get home here to feed, it was so bad we couldn't see, we put our old 'warm-ups' we had from basketball on, we'd take turns running ahead of the lights, if we fell off in the ditch we knew where the ditch was. We took turns, we got out about 4 miles over from here, and it was calm. We had about a foot of snow, but a couple days later the wind finally came and moved all the snow. We're very fortunate to have this protected space.

Judith: How about last winter? It was bad up in northwest Montana, Kalispell area.

Mrs. McDonald: Yeah, we had a tough winter. Jim has a sister that lives up by Echo Lake near Kalispell, she told us about how bad it was. We had a lot of snow.

Jim: And it was cold, but we can stand the cold, just dress for it. We can handle the cold better now, we have the machinery and we put up more hay. We put up our hay lose here, have buckrakes to push the hay up, and then stack it with a Farmhand with a pushoff. In the winter we use the same tractor with a grapple fork to grab the hay and dribble it out. Cattle are fed better now. When I look back now, we pitched a couple loads of hay for 400 to 500 head of cows, didn't go very far. I pitched hay all day and that's as much as we got! But it kept me young and in shape I guess!

Judith: Well I can't think of any other questions, any other stories you'd like to include?

Jim: Well, we're very fortunate to have 6 wonderful kids and 23 wonderful grandkids.

Mrs. McDonald: The oldest grandkid is 30 and the youngest one is a little 4 year old. The children used to all be in this state, but one family move away. The grandchildren are all scattered of course, but our family is close. . . . (short continued visit about kids and grandkids)............... 

End of Interview