Edd Nentwig: I’d like to talk with Earl White of Forsyth [Montana] today in our interview. Earl, I’d like to start with where you were born and grew up.

Earl White: Well, I was born in Minnesota at Fergus, but my folks moved out here before I was two years old to Hysham [Montana]. They settled on the north side of the river [Yellowstone River]. In a couple years, they took up a homestead on the north side of the river.

EN: When were you born?

EW: 1910.

EN: 1910. When did you first become involved in trapping?

EW: Oh about—I would say about 1924 I started trapping.

EN: You were a young boy then?

EW: Yes. I started out trapping skunks and worked up from there.

EN: How did you get—did somebody teach you how to trap or did you just start?

EW: Well, I had an uncle that trapped coyotes, and I learned from him. We set coyote traps, I went trapping then. We got some set lines too that we run. I worked for some sheep outfits and they had me do some coyote work. Then from there, I got in with the government, trapping.

EN: About what time did you go to work for the government?

EW: In the spring of ’44. I worked for them until I got drafted into the army in ’45. In February ’45, I went into the army, and got out again in the last of January in ’46. Then I went right back to work for the government then as a trapper.

EN: You worked with the sheep men, and you were a predator control person too?

EW: I guess predator control, that was our job. We would take care of coyotes, was the main thing.
EN: When you worked for the government, you were speaking earlier that you worked with the 1080 [a type of poison, sodium fluoroacetate]. Could you tell me some about that?

EW: Yes, we used the 1080. We started in November of 1947 with the 1080, and we used it every winter up until it was discontinued in the Nixon administration. It was very effective for the control of coyotes. It was most effective on the dog family. Other things it was more—it took more to kill them. It was a very effective poison for coyotes. There just wasn’t anything that could control the coyotes like 1080. Of course, now that the coyotes are worth something again, I wouldn’t like to see them use 1080 except in spots where it’s hard to get into. Like, the Missouri Breaks would be a real ideal place for the 1080 to control. Any place, rough country that they can’t get into, 1080 is real ideal to control the coyotes.

EN: What types of application did you use? Did you use chunk baits?

EW: Mostly in horse meat. We took a horse, and kill it and butcher it out, cut it up in pieces. Inject the poison—it was mixed in water—inject it into the meat while it was still warm, that way it would get into the meat real well. We would use the least amount of it as we could to make it effective for the coyote. Other things eat on it—I’ve had badgers eat on it, it just stays there—and not kill them. The kind that I use, the 1080, I only saw one dead eagle. It probably fed into a place where it was concentrated a little stronger. Magpies get into them, put it in there, or even skunks, but it is really effective on the coyotes.

EN: When you worked for the government, did you primarily work on just predators alone or did you work on beaver damage, or anything like that?

EW: No, beaver damage, the game wardens took care of that. We did do a lot of rodent control work. We poisoned a lot of prairie dog towns. An awful lot of prairie dog towns when I first went to work for them. We used the 1080 oats for them too. That did kill a lot of coyotes because they eat the prairie dogs, but that was just them because they would eat the whole prairie dog. Birds and stuff that just ate on the meat, it didn’t just them. If they ate the stomach contents, then they got poisoned, but most of your birds just ate on the meat.

EN: What area did you work on the prairie dogs? Right out of Hysham?

EW: No. Well, I did some in Treasure County, but the most were in Rosebud County on the north side of the river [Yellowstone River]. I did do some in Bozeman on the south side.

EN: Is that where you mostly did coyotes too?

EW: Coyotes, when we first went out, there were two trappers in the county. One was stationed at Rosebud and I was at Bonanza. The north side of the river of Treasure County and Rosebud was my area until you got down the corridor. We worked together.
EN: Could you tell me some of your experiences of trapping coyotes? How you—not necessarily your methods and things like that—but you probably have some interesting stories while you were working.

EW: When I first went to work for the outfit, my favorite set was by a lamb that they killed. At that time they were using a lot of herders. If a coyote killed a lamb, he’d come back to it as soon as he could, to eat again. That was my ideal set then. In later years, after we used 1080 and there weren’t so many coyotes, they quite using the herders so much, mostly run in pastures. The coyote could get a kill most anytime he want to. He wouldn’t necessarily come back to his same kill because if there was anything suspicious about it, he would just go and make another kill. So then you had to do it a little different. You could hardly set in the pasture either because sheep run loose. You’re just as apt to catch sheep as a coyote. So I used to, especially with woven wire fences, I would work the fences and find where they crawl through. You might think a coyote would come up to a fence and just jump over it, but he doesn’t. On a woven wire fence, he will find a place he can crawl under. That made an ideal place to set because you can make the set on the outside, away from the sheep.

EN: When they got rid of the herders and they went mainly to pastures, about what time was that, they did that?

EW: Oh, not too long after—the first couple years we used the 1080, we really thinned out the coyotes. Herders were harder to get, too. You take nowadays, it’s almost impossible to get a herder to keep the coyotes out. From the start, a lot of herders in the country, it was just their job was to herd sheep.

EN: Go ahead.

EW: That’s all.

EN: When you worked for the sheep outfit, were you just trapping or did you herd sheep too?

EW: I usually worked through (unintelligible). I was the one where the coyotes were the worst. When the sheep men found out I had some hounds, why they had me get those hounds out there. So I’d hunt coyotes. Then it got so, when we went out to go lambing, they just had me hunt coyotes. I didn’t do any lambing unless we had some bad weather.

EN: Did the hounds work pretty good for you?

EW: Oh yes, I had some good dogs in those days.

EN: How did you work with the dogs?
EW: Well, I hunted the coyotes around the sheep range on horseback, and these dogs, they wanted to fight, and they’d jump a coyote. Then I’d hunt for the coyote then too.

EN: Did you have to have a kill dog, or did your stag dogs do the killing?

EW: Well, the dogs I had, they were all good fighters. Of course, I used at least two, and usually three together.

EN: Did you collect the bounty for the coyotes you killed?

EW: The sheep men paid me a bounty. They paid me so much, it didn’t matter where you land a bounty.

EN: About what was the bounty on a coyote? Would you get on a coyote?

EW: Well, the sheep men would give me two dollars for pups, and four dollars for the old ones.

EN: There were a lot of coyotes then?

EW: Oh yes, there were a lot of coyotes.

EN: Kept you pretty busy?

EW: Yes, I never ran out of coyotes.

EN: You pretty much full time trapped most of your life then?

EW: Yes. I went to work for the government then and I worked steadily with them. Except for the brief time I was in the service. Until November of ’70. After that, I worked up in Garfield County. I was under the same supervision federal supervision, but I was paid for the county. Doing the same kind of work. I did that for five summers. That is from the first of April to the first of October. Then I trapped for the fur in the wintertime.

EN: So you worked from about ’70 to ’75 still with the county.

EW: That’s right.

EN: How do you feel about the aerial predator control program?

EW: Well, I feel very good about it. These people that are having trouble and need some help, I think it’s just kind of a pacifier. If we didn’t have that, we’d probably have 1080 back. That would really take them. Of course, I’m not against 1080, even in country where it’s rough and you can’t trap anyway as soon as the snow gets deep at all. Like your Missouri Breaks and other
areas just as bad. I don’t think it’s all that bad for the fur trappers either because they go in there where they have a problem and work it out. That’s all there is to it.

EN: They don’t take all the coyotes.

EW: No. I’ve done aerial hunting myself, I know that they soon wise up to the airplane and especially the helicopter. They can hear that helicopter from quite a ways before they get there. They soon learn to hide.

EN: Ever trap much fox or cats?

EW: I trapped quite a bit of fox. After we used 1080, why, the bobcat population really took over the country. We were getting a lot more cats than we did before we used the 1080 and killed off the coyote. For one thing, the 1080 wasn’t put out too thick. They figured one to a township, one to a station or township. Your bobcats didn’t cover that much country, and they didn’t eat on the bait like the coyote did. They would usually rather get a rabbit then eat on an old piece of frozen meat anyway. I could catch bobcats in an area where I had a 1080 station.

EN: At this station, how big of a chunk of meat did you use?

EW: Oh, about 50 or 60 pounds. It was like a hind leg, rib sections, stuff like that. They’d average about 50, 60 pounds.

EN: Did they coyote go very far before the 1080 would take them?

EW: Yes, they could. That was a slow poison. Unless they filled up and laid down right in the area, you’d never find them. I don’t think I’ve ever seen dead coyotes from 1080 poison.

EN: Did you market your fur through the government then, when you were trapping in the fall? I know in the summertime, when you trapped, the furs weren’t worth anything.

EW: No, when the furs were worth anything—for a long period of time, from the time we started using 1080 the fur, the long fur market was down. We didn’t skin them in the wintertime or any other time. We just took the scalp. A little later on, there was a market for the large bobcats; they sold them through the taxidermist. So we saved the biggest bobcat.

EN: Did the government supply all your equipment for you?

EW: Yes, they supplied the traps, the coyote getter, and of course the 1080 poison, and the kit that we used.

EN: What kinds of traps did you mainly use?
EW: When I first went to work for them, the Number 4 Newhouse was the main trap. Then they went to the Number Three Victor Oneida, with an offset jaw. That’s my favorite trap today.

EN: Is that the Three N?

EW: Three N, yes.

EN: With the cast iron jaw?

EW: I suppose—they’re an offset jaw. I wouldn’t say they’re cast, because you can dent them.

EN: Can you?

EW: Yes, but they are steel.

EN: You still trap now, any in the fall?

EW: Oh yes, I trap as long as the fur is prime.

EN: How is your retirement? Are you pretty happy now that you’re not working full time?

EW: Oh, I don’t think I could hold a job, working steady. This way I can work as I feel like it. Of course, I don’t seem to play out on the trap line.

EN: You have lots of stamina for trapping?

EW: Yes, I got plenty of stamina for that.

EN: Did you ever have any children that you taught to trap or—?

EW: I have one boy, but he never did learn to trap. When he was growing up, it didn’t look like too good a future trapping. The fur market—there just wasn’t a fur market for the long fur. He got into the welding business. He’s bonding up there at Roscoe’s Steel and Culvert Co. at Billings [Montana] right now.

EN: Did you say your grandson flies predator control?

EW: I have a stepson and he’s working for the federal government now as a trapper. He flies airplanes—as a gunner in the airplane, and a helicopter.

EN: He’s kind of working at your old job.

EW: Yes, the same kind of work.
EN: Do you give him so tips now and then?

EW: Oh yes. I even went out with him the other day and set a couple traps.

EN: Oh did you? How’s the population right around here where you live?

EW: It isn’t too bad. The south side of the river here has quite a lot timber on it, and the airplane and the helicopter isn’t too effective over here. There’s still plenty of coyotes to trap.

EN: When we were talking earlier, you said when you went to work for the government, Bateman was in charge then?

EW: That’s right. R.E. Bateman, district agent for the state of Montana.

EN: Was he a good fellow?

EW: I heard more about him than I knew personally. Yes, he was quite a hound man himself. He went to work for them back in the days when the wolves were in the country. He retired within a couple years after I went to work for them.

EN: Was is just you and another fellow that worked under Bateman?

EW: He had a man named Grand (?) that was working under him, and he was the district agent after Bateman retired. Grand was district agent pretty much all the time that I worked for the outfit. Mark Meiner (?) took Grand’s place about the last year or two that I worked for them.

EN: How was Grand to work for?

EW: Grand was a real good man. He stuck up for his men, and you couldn’t ask for a better district agent.

EN: How did it work when you worked for the government? Did a sheep rancher or a farmer call your boss, and then he sent you out into the field?

EW: Yes. As the ranchers became more acquainted with you, a lot of times, they just sent work directly to you. I—most of times I worked for them, there wasn’t too much aerial hunting. You mostly had to go out and work it out yourself. The last several years, we got more aerial hunting. It was a big help in areas where they could work open country. They could come in. Usually I worked on the ground and helped them get the coyote out where they could get him.

EN: How do you feel about trapping, personally?
EW: I think it’s a great thing. It’s a necessary thing to take care of the coyotes. You don’t want the coyotes to take over the country. That was one reason they had to use the 1080, was because the fur market went bad in the spring of ’44. Of course, by ’47, winter of ’47, ’48, when we first used the 1080, why, the coyote was awfully thick. The cow men wanted the 1080 just as bad as the sheep men.

EN: I think it was in 1964 that they stopped the general use of 1080, wasn’t it?

EW: It may have been. I can’t remember the exact year, but it seemed like it was a bit later than that. I’m not sure.

EN: In the last three or four years, in the ’70s, oh, ’76 and ’77 is when we had our peak in the coyote population wasn’t it?

EW: I suppose, right in there. They’re down again to what they were.

EN: Before they stopped using 1080?

EW: It’s kind of a funny thing. Of course, when I first started trapping, there wasn’t any such thing as 1080. There were a lot of people trapping. I believe the coyote population then was just the same as it was now. Then the fur market went to pieces the spring of ’44. Of course, there was no incentive. There might have been a bounty for a little while, but they dropped the bounty too. What coyotes were taken were just shot from the road. They didn’t even bother to pick them up because they weren’t worth anything. Then they had to do something, so we put out this 1080 and that completely controlled the coyotes.

EN: When you worked for the government, did you make all your own scents or did you buy some?

EW: I made most of my own scent. Nowadays, they give the boys all kinds of scent. Then, we didn’t get too much from them. Once in a while they’d give us something, but we usually made up our own.

EN: You had to learn the tricks of the trade by yourself a lot of the times.

EW: Yes, quite a lot. They gave us some snares, and they got us started on coyote calling too, but for the most part, we made our own callers. Where now they furnish callers for them. They even have electronic callers right in the pickup. My stepson said it cost 1,200 dollars. Well I never thought of getting anything like that (Laughs).

EN: About what were you making, say on an annual basis when you were working for the government?
When I first went to work for them in the spring of ’44, I remember my wages was 137.50 a month. I got five cents a mile. I was allowed 1,500 miles a month. They’d give me ten dollars a month for a saddle horse. I had two saddle horses when I first went to work for them. It wasn’t too many years after that, we found the use for the horse. At least my supervisor figured a horse, the only good he was for 1080 bait, and a dog wasn’t good for anything. So we finally put the horses in, and I was just a straight pickup traveler, or jeep.

Do you think you were as effective without the horse and the dogs as you were the pickup?

With the 1080, I soon found out that it was kind of hard to take care, to keep them away from that 1080. I went out of the dog business pretty early, but a horse was pretty useful if you liked to use one, especially in denning time.

How did you locate your dens, with dogs?

No, you just get over the country. If you could find an area that had quite a few tracks, you’d just kind of keep working into rougher country, and following the trails—you’d know what a den trail was, it was pretty easy—you would wind up on your den.

How do you feel about the government now? Do you think they are doing as good of a job as they did then?

I think maybe they’re starting to come back a bit. Just a year or two ago, the environmentalists were running them, and they weren’t very effective. The fact is that the boys worked according to their rules. They got hardly anything done. We were only supposed to go in and take coyotes that were killing, and it’s my idea that it would be kind of hard to tell. Then if they got them, why, they were supposed to get that den, so the pups wouldn’t starve to death. That would be kind of hard too, to find out where them coyotes were coming from, find the den. I think there were a lot of round pegs in square holes.

For a while there anyway. That’s right. There’s a lot of talk now, I know, amongst trappers, about our new president, new administration—President Reagan—that, like you say, things are coming back to being a little bit common sense.

That’s right. They got a new Secretary of the Interior [James G. Watt]. He’s a Western man, and he takes care of the environment and all that. He’s not an extreme environmentalist.

Do you think we have to have a fine balance, then?

Right. We can’t have one of them far out guys.

How do you feel personally about the coyote? Do you have an admiration for him?
EW: I do. Of course, when he gets the taste of a lamb, you’re going to have to kill him to stop him. A coyote is—they got more principles than a lot of men. They stick by their mates. I chased them with dogs. You jump a pair of coyotes, the old dog will take off and the hounds will invariably get him before the ever get the female. I’ve seen that. I’ve come up to a den and a couple of them jump out. The old dog will run out by you—

EN: Try to elude you from the den.

EW: That’s right. Try to elude you from the den.

EN: They’re pretty good parents.

EW: That’s right, and they stick together. If you get the female, the male coyotes will take care of the pups. If they’re big enough to eat meat, why, he’ll provide for them.

EN: Well, I see you’re about ready to have dinner, though, so we’ll stop here. In the future, if we could, I’d like to talk again, and try to see what we want to talk about. Maybe we could talk some more.

EW: If you’re in the county, stop by anytime.

[End of Interview]