The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Suzanne Vernon: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about when she was a kid.

Ken Huston: No, they had quite a time living up here then. There wasn’t much fun in it, you know.

SV: People just lived off the land. . . Little hunting, fishing.

KH: That’s about it.

SV: Depression years. . .

KH: They were pretty tough. They did pretty well, though. Dad sold a lot of beaver pelts.

SV: So he was a trapper?

KH: Well, just from necessity. He didn’t have a license. Poaching, you know. Sold them to somebody who did have a license.

SV: Some were on permits then. . .

KH: Well, that’s what I mean.

SV: What did he do for cash otherwise?

KH: He worked mostly for the ACM. He was a logger, pretty much. Woodworth. That’s about the only place he really worked. He used to work for the Forest Service in the summertime. Smoke chaser. Firefighter. There wasn’t many roads back in this part of the country, then, you know. But they had a lot of trails to follow. But they didn’t have no...it wasn’t like it is now. Christ, you can drive anywhere now.

SV: Were your folks in here when the 1929 fire burned?

KH: Oh yeah. The ‘29, and the ‘33 burn. This whole valley nearly burned up. The ‘33 burn... I think there was different fires. I think there was one in . . . for years and years there was different fires, burning this country up. My grandma started one of them.

SV: I heard part of that story. . . (Lundberg’s. 1929 fire.)
KH: It used to be years go you could ride horses all over this country.

SV: Did you ride horses quite a bit?

KH: Oh yeah, but before that. The Indians used to burn this valley every fall. They’d torch it. The whole damn valley.

SV: Why?

KH: To keep the under brush down. You could ride anywhere. Have you ever been back to Elk Creek? They used to ride horseback all over that country.

SV: It’s so brushy now.

KH: Well, that’s the Forest Service. Dad used to tell them, “You ought to give this country back to the Indians. They took better care of it than you did!” The Forest Service thought they were doing everything so good. The Indians, they’d hunt, then torch her off, then leave.

SV: They didn’t care where it burned. Wasn’t anybody living here . . .

KH: The country survived great. But now, it’s dangerous now. If this country ever caught on fire. . . can you imagine the summer homes that’s going to pshht. We’re lucky, this valley ain’t had a bad fire in a long, long time.

SV: I suppose. The last one would have been in the thirties.

KH: If we ever get the right circumstances down here, this valley’s gonna go. I just dread it.

SV: Well I think a lot of people dread it.

KH: They don’t know. They have no idea what the hell they are getting into. These summer homers, say, “We gotta have these trees.” They build with the trees right up around the house. When they getting ready to torch, they’re house is gone. The house ain’t got a prayer.

SV: Somebody told me that the area up Kraft Creek and Elk Creek where the fire did burn in 1929, was all blowdown.

KH: Well, a lot of it was.

SV: Do you remember the Lindberg fire?

KH: Oh yeah. That blew down in, oh, I was pretty old when that went on.
SV: Toward the fifties?

KH: Oh yeah. My dad went up there and helped salvage log that. He was a timber faller up there. They didn’t have much to fall. He was in there with a chainsaw when they logged that. How old was I? I was in the 8th grade when I worked for Lee and Percy Wilhelm up there.

SV: It was Lee and Percy there that had that mill?

KH: Yeah.

SV: 8th grade, what did you do for them?

KH: Piling lumber. Working on the green chain.

SV: Somebody told me there was just a whole little town. . .

KH: It was. It was a nice mill.

SV: There’s nothing there today.

KH: No. They had a beautiful mill in there. I don’t know how many years it was in there.

SV: It employed a lot of people. Did they get most of their lumber out of Lindbergh:

KH: A lot of it. I think that’s why Lee and Percy moved up there. The Forest Service promised them timber from the blowdown. They got timber from elsewhere later on. They hauled a lot of that blewed down timber out to Pyramid, too. Out to Seeley.

SV: If your dad worked as a faller up there, that must have been dangerous.

KH: He eventually pretty near got killed up there. A tree broke and snapped up. Caved a bunch of his ribs in. He was in the hospital long, long time. Tree was bent like that and just touched it with a ? and POP, snapped right in two and threw him up in the goddamned air. Broke seven ribs. Banged him up pretty bad.

SV: I visited with Bud Wolfe a little, and he said everything in there was in a bind.

KH: Oh yeah, it was just horrible.

SV: What school were you going to in the 8th grade.

KH: I was going to school in Missoula. I’d come up here in the summertime to go to work.
SV: Did your folks live in Missoula?

KH: My mom and dad were divorced. My dad had a place on Barber Creek then.

SV: Where at?

KH: Right there where Rich Nelson lives? Right across the fence, where all them houses are now? That used to belong to my dad, my dad and mom.

SV: On this side of the highway?

KH: West side, over there on what they call Jette Road now. My dad had an 80 in there.

SV: Do you remember seeing wildlife in there when you were a kid?

KH: Oh yeah. Lots of grizzly bears. That used to be about one of the biggest grizzly bear crossings in the country, right there. We used to be grizzly bears cross there all the time. Right there below the house. They used to cross that meadow.

SV: There’s quite a swampland across there... 

KH: Yeah, the grizzly bears crossed there all the time.

SV: Do you remember seeing bear that you thought you’d see last year, the same bears? Any particular colored bears?

KH: The grizzly bears I remember. They were so pretty, you know. They crossed there all the time.

SV: There must have been some reason...

KH: It was just one of their crossings. I think they still cross there, only they go a little farther south. They cross between where Evelyn Jette lives and where we used to live. They still probably cross there, but nobody sees them. They are pretty sneaky.

SV: Cross in the dark or something?

KH: Well, yeah, and if they want to do something, they do it anyway. All this bullshit about grizzly bears... “We gotta protect them...” When they want to go somewhere, they’re gonna go somewhere. You don’t have to make them a highway, you don’t have to make them a tunnel. When they want to go somewhere, they’re gonna go. The hell with the humans. I sit back and I laugh. Sure these people study them, but I never... when a grizzly bear wants to, he’ll come in
your house. He’ll tear the door off, you know? (laughs) Back in what we used to call Shaw Creek, a cabin back in the Bob Marshall? They had a little grizzly bear there that, they had Shaw Cabin, a Forest Service cabin. They had a bear there for awhile. He used to knock the door down. Bite holes in all the food cans. It was one of those that had four-pane windows. He’d take and knock the window out. Take the mattress off the beds and shove them out through that hole. It had already knocked the door down. He had the whole goddamned door to drag that mattress outside. NO! He’d take that mattress and pole it out the other hole. People would think that was the funniest thing! They finally killed him. Just silly things like that, you know, them grizzly bears.

I’ve seen two huge grizzly bears in my time. They looked like Gentle Ben, you know.

SV: Where?

KH: One on Kraft Creek, another one standing in the road by Goat Creek. I was riding down to Swan Lake for a dance. On my horse. Just riding down there. He comes, out of the brush. Right in the middle of the road. We stood there. I looked at him. I had a gun. Carrying a pistol, you know. I thought, “Jesus. Gawd. You’re a big old bear.” I could see his feet, standing right in the middle of the road. He’s got big, huge feet. Long toe-nails. I thought, “Now, what in the hell am I gonna do if I shoot you?” We stood there and we looked at each other, and we looked at each other. Pretty soon he got tired and walked off towards the river. But oh, he was huge.

Then that one, that big old one that used to be over at Kraft Creek. He was huge, too. Gawd, he was a big bear. Just a huge grizzly. Black, kinda blackish and silver. Just a huge, huge grizzly bear. I had a gun then, too. But, a big grizzly bear. You just gotta admire them. They are such an awesome creature, you know? You really gotta respect them, and I do. They are so beautiful. Man. No, I had a hunting rifle when I seen that one up on Kraft Creek. I was sitting in the pickup. I could have shot him. He was humongous. I let him go. I never killed him.

Oh, I’ve seen a few little ones.

SV: What year did you see the one up Kraft Creek?

KH: Hmm. ‘59? ‘60? Something like that.

SV: That makes sense. That’s about the time they put that road in. . .

KH: They put it in before that. That good road, you know.

SV: I’ll guess the one up by Goat Creek was the late forties?
KH: Let’s see. I was chasing my... Blanche was just a girl then. We was just kinda going together. Seventh, eighth grade? Ninth grade? Early fifties. I used to ride my horse down to Swan Lake to go to the dance. I didn’t have no car.

SV: You musta had a good horse!

KH: Boy, I did. I had fast horses when I was a kid. Boy, I had good horses. If it wasn’t a good lookin’ horse, and fast... I was older than that. I have to stop and think now. Blanche [Blanche Fenby] was in high school. I’d already quit school. So I was 15, 16 years old then.

SV: Her family had the mill?


SV: That operation went on for quite awhile... Did you hear other stories about grizzly bears?

KH: No, not really. People didn’t talk much about them. They were all over. There was a lot of them.

SV: It wasn’t necessarily news?

KH: And back in them days, if they got too friendly, people just shot them anyway. People didn’t want them around. Dad seen a huge one up Lion Creek, years and years ago. Can’t even remember when that was. Bears never really used to be a problem. People seen them, and then they were gone. Not like now. Everybody has bear problems. I think it was a poor huckleberry year this year. That’s why everybody’s having bear troubles now. People don’t take care of their garbage, so the bears come.

SV: People didn’t used to have the kind of garbage we got now...

KH: We had all our own garbage dumps.

SV: Did they get into them once in a while?

KH: Oh yeah. Everybody had their own place where they dumped cans, and garbage, you know. Because you sure in the hell didn’t have no pick-up here. Usually over a bank... Down the old, old county road...that big fancy house is there now...can’t think of his name. That’s where our garbage dump was, was down that road.

SV: Did you ever hear any stories about wolves?

KH: No. There was a few. You could hear them. Once in a while. But, big deal.
SV: It wasn’t like people saw them?

KH: Not very often. But they were around. People would see tracks once in awhile. People would say, Yeah, I seen wolf tracks. They were around, you know. There wasn’t very many of them.

SV: You were in the Bob Marshall... see any tracks there?

KH: Quite a bit of time in there. We had some, just kinda like out here.

SV: Somebody told me the only den they knew of was at the mouth of the Gordon.

KH: Russ Fox seen them on Penant, down on the Little Salmon. But they coulda ranged back and forth, you know. But, there coulda been more than they figured, too.

SV: Were they like bears and avoided people?

KH: Yeah, they did. Well, they are protected now. So they got no fear. Nobody shoots at them hardly any more. Animals know when people are going to hurt them. They got instincts, you know. Just like deer. You walk out here and see a deer in the summertime. He’s got no fear of you really. But you go out there with a rifle in the fall. Things travel between humans and animals that, the animal says, “Oh, ho ho, that man has got bad thoughts about me...” so he leave, you know. I don’t know if it’s the look in your eye or... they can sense when you are going to kill them. When a man’s on the prowl to hunt, deer know that, you know, they do. That’s the way the bears and everything else was. Years ago. They knew they was in trouble if they got in trouble with a human. Now, big deal. He’ll walk up and slap hell out of some human, cuz he knows he ain’t gonna hurt me. You know, that’s my belief. Animals sense that. When a human’s on the hunt... he’s nothing but an animal. When he’s on the hunt and he’s gonna kill, he gives off vibrations, too, that animals pick up, too. That’s just my belief.

SV: Several people have told me though that you are a good observer of wildlife and we can trust what you are saying.

KH: Well, I ain’t gonna lie to you. I used to love to ride horseback. I was doing something all the time out in the brush. Even when I was a little kid, I was never home. I was out in the brush. It was so nice out there. Fishing, hunting, trapping or something. I was gone.

SV: You’ve noticed a lot of changes in the fishing?

KH: A little. Some ways, it’s improved. Some ways, it ain’t. It’s all these summer homers. Years ago, deer hunting was damn tough in this valley. People started moving in and Christ we got deer all over. Everybody’s yard’s got deer in them. Didn’t used to be that way. You could hunt
and hunt and hunt and never see a deer. Spend days out there and never see one, never jump one.

SV: How about mule deer?

KH: We never had any mule deer on the valley floor. Up in the foothills a few. People back in the old days wouldn’t hunt a mule deer. They stink so goddamned bad. That was a disgrace to have to go kill a mule deer. People never even thought about killing a mule deer. People considered them trash deer, cuz they stunk so bad.

SV: Didn’t want to eat them?

KH: Hell no. That was horrible. When I lived down to Garrison. Blanche’s dad started a mill down at Garrison. Blanche and I moved down there. I learned how to take care of them mule deer. They were good. You take care of them in a different way. When you get a mule deer. The minute you knock them down you jerk the hide off. Scrub them down with cold water. Get rid of that stinkin’ hide. Then they taste pretty good. Get rid of the scent glands, cut the head off, hang them up and let them age good. Hell, there ain’t nothing the matter with them.

I was never a trophy hunter. Dad, you know, if I shot a big buck, he’d drag me out. Man, bitch? He’d just a soon hunt a little young buck or a dry doe or something to eat. Cuz Dad says, You can’t eat them goddamned horns! Them horns make awful poor soup! Dad would never hunt them great big bucks. So that’s the way I kind of learned. I’m a meat hunter.

SV: Most people who were born and raised here probably are...Did you see very many elk?

KH: Not really. There wasn’t many elk in this country. They were damn scarce.

SV: Ollie Hill told me there was a little bunch around his place. Barber Creek.

KH: Well, up on Spook Ridge, there’s been elk there forever and ever, and ever. There weren’t a lot of them. But there was a little bunch up there. There was a bunch up on Fry Meadow. Let’s see, where else. Some up in there around the Gordon Ranch. But sometimes that Bunch on Barber Creek and the one on the Gordon Ranch were pretty much together, cuz that ain’t very far through there, as far as an elk goes, you know.

SV: How about Elk Creek?

KH: That Elk Creek country is a whole different ball game.

SV: Why?

KH: It’s steep, it’s rugged. Steep rugged country. The missions are altogether different...
[End of Tape 1, Side A]
KH: I wasn’t very old, 9 or 10 years old. We went clean to the forks of Elk Creek, bull trout fishing, you know. We made one trip a year up in there. We’d bring out eight, nine, ten, big bulls. That was our trip. Grandma would can them. That was our one trip a year up Elk Creek. You know?

SV: That’s quite a bit of fish to supplement the diet!

KH: Grandma would make them last. She’d can them, you know. She had a way of pickling fish that nobody’s ever duplicated. Grandma was an excellent cook. Gawd that woman could cook. She had a pickled fish recipe that nobody’s ever duplicated.

When I was little we used to go up Glacier Creek, up at the old Knoopf (?) place. Catch all kinds of them little cutthroat. Them little buggers, you know. That’s about all there was in Glacier. Well, that’s about all there is now. We used to catch hundreds of them little buggers. We’d take ‘em home and pickle them! Put them in pint jars. When Dick and Jane Hickey owned Lindbergh Lake? They offered Grandma three and a half a pint for them pickled fish! Back in them days . . . she’d never sell them. It was against the law. But they said they would buy all she could produce. They were so good. Oh, man.

SV: Recipe?

KH: My mom had it. My sister had it. But it wasn’t like Grandma’s. I don’t know what the hell she done. Hickey offered her three and a half a pint for them gawd-damned pickled fish. Oh they were so good to eat.

SV: Wish you had some now?

KH: Oh, man. There was a lot of good fishing. See the Bigfork Dam is what wrecked the fishing in this country.

SV: I’ve heard other people say that.

KH: Well they cut off the supply of fish. You can’t have fish come up a stream and then all of a sudden just chop it off. There was no fish ladder in that dam, until . . . I was 19 or 20 years old when they built that ladder down at Bigfork. By that time the cutthroat runs had all died out, you know. When I was a kid, I was born in ‘34, must have been ‘36 or ‘37, Dad was trucking for the Forest Service. Hauling freight. I used to ride down to Bigfork with him. Pick up a load of freight and come back home again. But we used to stop there, the highway used to be right there across from the dam. Across the river where it runs now. We used to stop there in the spring when the cutthroat were trying to get up that dam. You could count thirty, forty, great big ole’ cutthroat trying to come up that dam, trying to jump it, you know. They just couldn’t
hardly make it, you know. Once in awhile one would go over. But that fish ladder they got in there, that’s a joke. You go down there in the summertime and it’s dry.

SV: There’s been a lot of controversy over that.

KH: Fish comes up the ladder, spawns? Little babies, where do they go? Back through the turbines. What the hell, they’re fish mush when they come out the other end. What are you going to do with these babies when they come back?

SV: What about bull trout?

KH: Bull trout used to stop in Swan Lake. To me, that’s where the Fish and Game screwed up. If they would have planted cutthroat in Swan Lake, and started a migration cycle from Swan Lake instead of Flathead Lake, we’d have saved our cutthroat. See, the Fish and Game didn’t do that. In the forties the Fish and Game planted, oh they planted everything up in here except what they should have planted. They planted rainbow. They planted lotta hybrids. Rainbow-cutthroat crosses. And what in the hell good is that? Sure they are nice to catch, but they don’t produce anything. You don’t continue the species. Because they can’t breed and they can’t... That’s dumb. But the Fish and Game, to my thoughts, have never taken care of Swan River. They have screwed us over so bad. They got all that country over by Helena, the Madison, the Jefferson... all that big country over there, where all the politicians are, so that’s where all the money goes. It don’t take Einstein to figure that out! But Swan River, they’ve screwed Swan River over so bad. They planted rainbow. Rainbow in this country is a big joke. He don’t stay here in the wintertime. The cutthroat stayed here. All the cutthroat wouldn’t migrate back to the Flathead Lake. They’d come up these little creeks and get above beaver dams. And they would stay there year ‘round. So we had good fishing in Swan River twelve months a year. Even the cutthroat from Swan River, they’d find a big backwater in the wintertime? Go down there and chop a hole in the ice and gawd you’d catch some nice big ole’ cutthroat in there.

SV: So they’d stay in the beaver dams and backwater?

KH: Yeah. Oh yeah.

SV: No winterkill?

KH: Hell no. They survived great. That’s when the Fish and Game said “Those fish can’t survive in there.” Jesus Christ, those fish survived in them old swampy looking beaver dams for hundreds of years, you know? No, some of these people that write books and do this wildlife study, they don’t really look very hard, I don’t think, at what actually happens to fish. And where they can live and prosper. I’ve caught so many good cutthroat trout out of these old swamp, beaver dams and stuff. When I was a kid, man oh man. Now people look at those places and say fish can’t grow in there.
SV: The right kind of fish.

KH: Yeah. Just give them a chance. The ole’ cutthroat need clear, cold water. I’ve caught too many in these old swamps and beaver holes. No, just like Elk Creek, you know. I would like to know when the last time those fish biologists... See, the bull trout go clean above the forks of the creek, of Elk Creek, to spawn. I would like to know the last time any of those fish and game guys have walked from the forks of Elk Creek down to the river. Years ago, the old timers used to kick out the beaver dams and clean the creek up so the fish could go up there. See, bull trout are what I call a low water fish. Cutthroat and them, they spawn in the spring when the water's high. Then if there’s an obstacle in the creek, when the water’s high, there’s going to be a little side channel of something around the obstacle. But in the fall, when the water is low, and you get an old beaver dam that’s got sticks sticking up in it. The water’s running through them sticks? How’s a bull trout going to get over the top. I have seen bull trout trying to jump beaver dams, hanging there. They jump up through them sticks, and a stick will go up through their gills... there they hang.

SV: That’s where they end up. So the old timers used to go through there and kick out the beaver dams?

KH: Oh yeah. When we’d fish in the fall, you know, we’d go up there and kick the beaver dams out and open them up. So they had running water. But you know, now, you cut out the creek. . .and well, they’ll hang you, you know? Years ago we used to make a way for the bull trout to run. When I was a kid, hundreds and hundreds of bull trout in Elk Creek. They were just laying like cordwood up there. Up there just below where they spawn. Waiting to go up and spawn. Hundreds and hundreds of bull trout.

When they amputated my leg in ‘63, I went back up there in ‘64. That’s the last year I went up there. So what happened after that I’ve never been back to look. When I first come back here after coming back from the Coast, I wanted somebody to take me up there just so I could look, you know. But, you can’t fish up there. You could still ride a horse up there. But nobody would go. Why go in there if you can’t fish?

So who in the hell takes care of the creek?

See, there’s a spot in Elk Creek right above Elk Creek Meadows, the whole damn creek goes through a vee rock. Comes down this little channel. And the right brush gets in that vee, they can’t even go to the spawning beds anymore. I’ve often thought I wonder when the last time was that anybody’s been up there and cleaned that out. Cuz one fuzzy old log or top out of a tree floats down there and jams up in that vee. That’s it. You know I’ve often wondered how often the Fish and Game runs that creek so the fish can get up there and spawn. You see, you never seen a spawning bed below the forks of Elk Creek as far as I know. I spent years and years and years up there as a kid. Every fall I’d go up there and get my eight, ten bull trout and come out.

Ken Huston Interview, OH 422-040, 041, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
SV: So you never saw them spawn below the forks?

KH: No, above the forks of the creek. Never, never below. They used to lay in them pools, waiting to go up and spawn. They were just laying there just kinda waiting. But above the forks, them fish up there... spawning, fanning their beds.

SV: So I'll ask some questions.

KH: Ask them when the last time was that anybody walked that creek and cleaned the brush out of them bad spots. That used to be good fishing. There used to be cutthroat in there. But see the cutthroat, they didn’t go up above Elk Creek Meadows very far. They stayed pretty much down on the lower end of the creek. We used to either, when you went to Elk Creek, if you went trout fishing we went in to the old Knoof (sp?) place and fish the lower end of the creek. If you wanted bull trout, we went in by Newman’s old homestead. Up the trail and went in. So we had two ways of going in Elk Creek. Depending on what we was going to fish. If we wanted trout, we went to the lower end of the creek. If we wanted bull trout, we went to the upper end of the creek, if they was spawning in the fall. But that was neat. Look in them big holes and see hundreds and hundreds of them bulls. They was so beautiful. They’re bright spawning colors. Just laying there. Just like cord wood. Pretty near laying one on top of the other. Look like a big salmon run, you know.

SV: Were there birds around like eagles and owls?

KH: No. A bull trout don’t die like salmon. He just runs up and down there. After he spawns he just goes back out. The bears might have bothered them. Of all the times I spent up Elk Creek, my uncle Frank and I seen a big black bear one time. He was just walking right up the creek. Pretty near run into that son-of-a-bitch. Scared us to death. Come around this corner. Looking for bull trout. Looked up, looked right square into the ass-end of that big bear. Oh man. That old bear couldn’t hear us and we couldn’t hear him. Cuz of the water, down on the riffles. We froze right there. That old bear walked on up the creek, and out into the brush. But oh man. Then one time I was up there by myself and I stayed all night, why I stayed all night I don’t know. But I had enough fish just in one day, you know? And I was laying there by my fire. I heard this bear, he got to snapping his teeth at me. Rattling his teeth. I thought Oh boy, Kenny. I put some more wood on the fire. This old bear he was, I could hear him back there. I was kinda... this rock behind me. It was kinda concave and I was sleeping in it. Had my fire out here, you know? And I was laying there thinking you ole’ son of a bitch. I built a bigger the fire and got some pieces really burning good. I grabbed two pieces and I jumped up and waved them in the air and hollered and I listened. I could hear crash, crash, crash. That was the end of that bear. But he was old. They get nasty. The old teeth just snap, snap... I couldn’t see the... it was dark. I thought, oh gawd bear. I didn’t really care for that.
SV: Didn’t like his attitude?

KH: No. But I had a fire going. He kinda knew something was up. When I reared up outta there with two flaming sticks. . .hollered and screamed at him. He thought he didn’t want me. But see that was, I was only about 16, 17 years old. I used to go up there all by myself. Walking through Newman’s or walking through Kraft Creek. The old Knupf place (sp). No fear of breaking a leg or anything. If I’d had a broken leg, nobody woulda ever found me. I used to go up in there when I was 9, 10, 11 years old. All by myself. Dad would tell me, “Be careful.”

SV: You had a hunting rifle with you?

KH: Oh hell no. Just a fish pole is all.

SV: What did you use for bait?

KH: Dare devil. Flies. Them ole’ bull trout, they like them dare devils. You pull them through their spawning beds. They’d fight them. They’d actually grab at them and roll, trying to chase them outta there spawning beds. And we used to snag them once in awhile, you know, what the hell. There was lots of them. Hundreds of them suckers up there. Besides that, we only took 9 or 10 a year. It ain’t like we went back there every day and every day. We only made one trip a year up there, you know.

See now, down at Swan Lake, you can catch 365 of them suckers a year! You’re allowed one a day. So what does that tell you?

SV: I never thought of it that way.

KH: I used to take ten a year outta there, and they say I’m a game hog! Now you can go down to Swan Lake and catch one a day. Whoopie doo. . . get smart here. If they want to catch bull trout like that, I think they ought to do like they do on the coast. Make a steelhead permit. If you want a steelhead, you buy a card. You keep track. You know. If there such endangered and such horse puckie, give somebody a (?) make him pay for five fish a year, and when he fills up his card, he’s done. That’s my belief. But I’m just a dumb cowboy, what do I know? That’s my belief.

What really pisses people off up here, we can’t keep one! All them fish outta Swan Lake come up here to spawn and live when they are little. But no, up here we cannot have one fish. We can’t catch one fish. But you go to Swan Lake and can catch one a day. See that’s all politics. To me that’s politics.

SV: Not fisheries management?
KH: No. If they thought them fish were so goddamned valuable, they outta put them on a permit. Punch card. When you catch five a year... put a limit on them. What the hell you gonna do with a big bull trout anyway, besides smoke him? Five a year, or ten a year. Not one a day all year long...

Years ago when there was lotta bull trout. Sure we took them. We used to spear them, too. Which is illegal. But we only took so many. We didn’t annihilate the species. We used them. Yeah. The old timers, like my dad used to say, like any kid (I’d say) yeah I want to shoot that. . .(bear) Dad would just come unglued. Don’t you dare, he’d say. You ain’t gonna eat him. And if you shoot him then you can’t see him anymore. Kids nowadays, well what the hell do you want to shoot that for? Well, I don’t know. If you shoot him you can’t see him anymore. He’s gonna rot. My dad used to harp at me. If you ain’t gonna eat it, don’t shoot it. Someday you might want it! You might be out there and hungry. Need to shoot it. And if you shoot it just to waste it, it’s gone forever. Nope...me and the fisheries we don’t see eye to eye.

SV: What about brook trout?

KH: They’re trash fish.

SV: But they used to get pretty big and pretty abundant.

KH: But you see there wasn’t any brook trout in Swan River. Condon Creek had brook trout. That’s the only place they were. Brook trout is a trash fish, as far as I’m concerned. But that’s all there is in this valley, now, to speak of.

SV: Something musta changed that the brook trout ended up going everywhere.

KH: Well, because they got so damned many in Condon Creek they just migrated into the river. Just like they got pike in the Swan River. Got goddamned pike all over now. You go down to the river and catch a goddamned pike. The fish and game allows that trash. Then they wonder why they ain’t got no bull trout. They ain’t got no cutthroat. They got them goddamned pike. They are the worst carnivore in the country.

SV: They eat everything...

KH: The fish and game talks one story outta one side of their mouth and practices another story out of the other side of their mouth.

SV: It isn’t very effective management sometimes when that happens...

KH: Well, no. It looks like if they wanted to control them pike, they could find where they are spawning and they could do a lot of things to annihilate them pike. But the thing is, a few people probably like them. And some people don’t give a damn. A lot of people don’t like...
cutthroat. To me they are the most fabulous trout in the country. They’re good eating. Maybe they don’t fight like a rainbow. But they’re Swan River. A cutthroat trout is Swan River. I was born and raised on them cutthroat trout, you know? I just get up real tight when they talk about pike here and pike there. I just hate them, thoughts of pike taking over the country.

SV: Everybody sees that now.

KH: Oh yeah. The Fish and Game’s gotten, oh, it’s just gotten out of control. For the average person, you know, what the hell can we do.

SV: Well, we’re trying to do something by getting these comments down on paper.

KH: I don’t know. The fisheries, they’ve screwed over Swan River so bad, since the Bigfork dam went in, you know.

SV: Well, you spent a lot of time out there in the brush on horseback, did you notice any birds? That’ll probably be the next thing we’re sitting here talking about is owls . .

KH: There was lotsa owls. Shit we shot ’em all the time.

SV: Well, tell me what kind you saw!

KH: Well, big ones, little ones. If it wasn’t a songbird, if it killed the chickens, you’d shoot him!

SV: Owls like chickens . .

KH: Yeah. If they weren’t big enough to kill a chicken, let the little bastard live. You know them little sparrow hawks? The ones that sit in the air . . ? They’ll kill a chicken so quick it’ll make your head spin.

SV: I didn’t think they were big enough.

KH: Oh yeah. They come down, they travel 900 miles an hour. They’ll take a half grown chicken and just tip him over! Yeah. “Dad used to say What the hell you gonna shoot that hawk for? He ain’t big enough to kill a chicken.” Well, I had one kill a chicken within 8 or 10 feet of me once. There sitting on top of him was this little stinking sparrow hawk.

No, I never was much of a bird killer. The only time we really killed hawks or owls was out in the yard. Not when we were out in the woods. If they’re not around the house we let them live.

SV: Did you notice osprey?

Ken Huston Interview, OH 422-040, 041, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
KH: Oh yeah, lots. But I never did shoot them very much either. When I was fishing I never had a gun. All I ever packed was a fish pole.

SV: How about blue herons?

KH: Oh yeah. But I never shot a blue heron, or shitepoke.

SV: There’s a few places up and down the valley where they nest. Did you ever see a rookery?

KH: No. But they’re probably a worst fish catcher than fish hawks, pretty near.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
[Tape 2, Side A]

KH: It’s okay to use something, but don’t annihilate it, you know?

SV: I didn’t ask you about loons.

KH: They are all over. That’s something else we didn’t bother. The sound of a loon and a Pileated Woodpecker, are two sounds, that . . . they’re wild. They’re what wildness is all about. There’s nothing like the ring of a pileated woodpecker. When you hear him, it just makes you feel good. And loons the same way. When you hear a loon, gawd, that’s a beautiful sound. It’s remoteness. It’s, I don’t know. . . it’s nature. We never killed loons. We didn’t shoot pileated woodpeckers.

We killed a lot of grouse. We could eat them.

SV: Did you see pileated woodpeckers?

KH: Oh yeah. Go and look in that window. . . (Has a feeding station for birds. Pileated.) He never came back this year, but I watched him last. . . Something maybe killed him.

SV: What would kill a pileated?

KH: Oh, a blue falcon, or maybe a weasel. He had a spot up on that road. See, a Pileated Woodpecker makes a square hole. He had a spot down there on that road, only about that far off the ground. There were ants in that tree or something down there. So he dug a hole in there. When a pileated woodpecker gets down that low, then the weasels and the little animals can catch him, you know? And a weasel will kill anything.

SV: Blue falcon, goshawks?

KH: No, they’re called a . . . they’re a falcon.

SV: A merlin?

KH: I don’t know. We always called them blue falcons. They are one of the fastest birds of prey in the United States. You see them come through the yard here once in awhile. Just like a bullet, you know.

SV: Are they very big?

KH: Hell no. They ain’t got a wingspan on them that big. They’re small. What we call the blue falcon. They look kinda bluish, you know. That’s what dad called them so that’s what I called them.
Loons are pretty. They got a sound I just love. And the chirp of a pileated woodpecker, it sends shivers through your body to listen to them.

SV: Do you remember seeing loons up high?

KH: There are a lot of loons at Big Salmon Lake, but that’s the same altitude as here. They really don’t seem to be up high. Really they didn’t need to be. Lotsa room down on the flats.

SV: What about moose?

KH: Never seen a moose in this country. Never. Oh, people would see them once in a while. Used to be some down around Swan Lake. But people usually shot them, or something. But now I guess there’s quite a few of them. My kid’s even got a permit to hunt them this fall.

Moose were scarce as hen’s teeth back in them days.

SV: It’s brushier though?

KH: Yeah. Do you know that horse trainer over at Ronan? Somebody brought a moose calf down from Alaska, was going to use it in a rodeo act. Took him to this guy to train him. Well, they starved him to death. You know why? They was feeding him hay. They weren’t feeding him willow bushes. He actually died of malnutrition, cuz he didn’t have no brush to eat. There was a big piece in the paper about it. They said that moose actually starved to death.

SV: You said you trapped a little bit when you were a kid.

KH: In the fall, I’d make a little money trapping. Weasels, mostly. Their hide ain’t good until they turn white.

SV: How about coyotes?

KH: We used to shoot them all the time. Not for their hides. Dad and I we used to set up there. . . Nelsons didn’t live there years ago. They’d come up in the summertime. So as soon as school started we had the place all winter long all by ourselves. Years ago there wasn’t a highway going down that big meadow. Coyotes used to come out there all the time. We’d go out and shoot them coyotes, way down the other end of the meadow. We knew we couldn’t hardly hit them. There used to be lots of coyotes in here. Then they got the mange. That was horrible when they got the mange.

SV: I never heard that story.
KH: Oh, the rabbits got the mange. The deer got the mange. The coyotes got the mange. All their hair fell out you know. Coyote with nothing but a little strip of hair down his back. Maybe a little bit on the end of his tail, some on his legs. Otherwise he was bare. Course, you know they died in the wintertime, you know. No hair on them to keep them warm. The deer got big running sores on them. It was horrible.

SV: Was that when you were little?

KH: Yeah. They moved a bunch of sheep in down by Lion Creek. They figure it got started in there from the sheep. Then a lot of people got them cottontail rabbits you know. There used to be thousands of them. They figure the rabbits got too thick and got a disease. Of course, coyotes eat the rabbits. Then the coyote bites the deer. That’s the way it got transmitted.

SV: You’d remember the cottontails up here, because we only have hares . . .

KH: We only got two kinds of rabbits. See, cottontails and snowshoe hares. We don’t have jack rabbits. We got a lot of snowshoe rabbits.

SV: Why did somebody bring sheep into Lion Creek?

KH: I don’t know. We had one guy bring about 400 head of cattle over here from Great Falls one time. Turned them all loose in the valley. He never did get all his cows back.

SV: I wouldn’t think so.

KH: In this brush, you can hide a lot of cows. This is a big valley. And he didn’t put bells on them. . . I know some of them got eaten. They did. People, thought, well, that guy don’t know nothing, you know. If they bring cows over in this country and turn them loose, we’ll just eat ‘em! So they did!

SV: Nice change from venison.

KH: People have tried all kinds of crap in Swan River, you know.

SV: I notice you call it Swan River . . .

KH: Yeah, it’s not Condon. That’s a real sore subject in Swan River. People down there call it Condon. Up here it’s Swan River. This is Swan River. Not Condon. The only reason it’s called Condon is cuz Russ Conkling named the post office Condon.

SV: He took the name from the Creek and the Forest Service building?
KH: I guess. But this is not Condon this is Swan River. The Upper Swan. A lot of people call Swan River down there the other side of Swan Lake. But this up here is the Upper Swan. The name on the Community Hall says Swan River. But then some of the people down there, boy you call this place something besides Condon, and they get shook up. The only reason it’s Condon is because of Russ Conkling, he named the post office Condon instead of Swan River post office.

SV: When I talk to people about the guy who was named Condon, he didn’t live here year ‘round. . .

KH: No, no. He was just a Forest Service ranger.

(Note: Conflicting info about the origin of the name Condon.)

SV: Did you trap muskrats? Beaver?

KH: No. That was for the grownups. I was pretty little. The beaver trapping, that was for the grownups. My dad, and my uncles. All the old timers trapped beaver, whether they had a permit or not. They could always sell them. Gawd, I remember some of them big huge hides. Oh, man. Seventy, eighty inch hides. They called them blankets. Blanket beaver. During the Depression, that’s the way about 95% of the people lived in this country, was beaver hides. Any kind of trapping. Mink, martin. Weasels.

SV: So the fur prices were high?

KH: You could eighty, or ninety dollars for a big beaver hide. That was a lot of money. Even little kits and small females. Thirty-five, forty dollars apiece for a beaver hide? That’d buy food for three or four months.

SV: You couldn’t pass that up. . .

KH: Gawd, no. Even when I was in high school. When I first started high school--I only went one year--I could get two and a half, three dollars for a weasel hide.

SV: I didn’t know they were ever that high.

KH: Oh yeah. I caught one big weasel in my whole life. He stretched out thirty-two inches. He was huge. Dad says, “Gawd, where did you get him?” He was huge. He was a monster. He was pretty near the size of a little mink, you know? He was big. I shoulda kept his hide. Them damn crooks in Missoula only give me three and a half, four dollars for him.

SV: Sounds like a one-of-a-kind.

KH: He was. He was nice. Shoulda kept him.
SV: Tell me how you trap weasel.

KH: Back in them days we used . . . hang something in a tree, woodshed. (goes outside)

SV: Oh, you've got a trap. That's a small trap.

KH: That's what we used for weasel traps. I bought this at a yard sale. It's damn near worn out.

SV: Just to show somebody like me how to trap a weasel.

KH: Then you put grass over it or something, you know. Have a nail and nail it to a tree. Stick it under your bait. Weasel comes up . .

SV: Catches him . . . Any scent?

KH: No just bait. Scent we used to use on beaver. Put scent on a stick and stick it on the edge of the river, you know. Trap underneath the scent, so when the beaver stood up, swam over to the edge of the bank and smell the scent, his feet would get in the trap. End of that story. Then they had a big rock tied to the trap. He’d swim back out in the river and drown himself.

SV: Just pull him right under the water. There’s quite a bit written about the beaver trapping, but not so much about some of the other stuff.

KH: Weasels, I was just a kid then. Bout the only thing I ever trapped. When I got married, I quit. I had other ways to make a living . .

SV: By then the logging was doing pretty good.

KH: Yeah. See now I didn’t work in the woods. I worked in mostly sawmills. No I never did log much. I worked for Uno Strom and his mill, and I worked for Dobb and Ting.

SV: Tell me where Dobb and Ting’s mill was.

KH: Right there where Lucille Wilhelm is? That’s what we used to call the old Walker place. That’s where Dobb and Ting’s mill was. Then I worked years for Lee and Percy.

SV: I think people get Dobb and Ting and Lee and Percy mixed up. Lee and Percy were up at Lindbergh.

KH: Lee and Percy were at Swan Lake years before they moved up here.

SV: Which was the biggest of some of those mills.
KH: There at the last the Forest Service and everybody was pushing spruce. The bug killed spruce was horrible. The spruce beetle was just annihilating this country up here. So they cut. . .
the Forest Service pushed spruce something horrible. When they had that big mill up by the Gordon Ranch, Rother’s Mill, they cut pretty near anything up there. Yellow pine, whatever they brought in there. They cut a lot of ties. . . that was fir and larch, when they cut railroad ties. They cut a lot of ties up there. The old Wineglass Mill. I never did work up there.

No that ole’ Rother he was something else to work for. He’d find some guy, he didn’t like him. He’d can him. Then he’d say, wait a minute, wait a minute, I don’t want to see you walking down the road all by yourself. Then he’d go and find somebody else and can him too, just so. . .

SV: I never heard that!

KH: Didn’t you! Oh he was hell on that. Say, oh I don’t want to see you walking alone. So he’d go and find somebody else and can his ass, too. Send him down the road!

SV: Where did those people come from?

KH: I don’t know. Some of them old timers. . . ole’ Rother was a hard boiled old sucker, you know. But he would, he would actually can somebody else so you wouldn’t have to walk down the road alone.

SV: What a story. There was another mill up Rumble Creek. . . Broten?

KH: See years ago, well, Uno Strom had that big old mill over there where Frank Jette used to live (behind Swan Centre, across river). Right down here on the river. All right, then after that, he built him a little portable lodgepole mill for making two-by-fours. Then, back in the, sixties, early sixties. This country was covered with little portable lodgepole mills. They were all over. They were, I don’t know. . . I can’t remember how many there was. They’d go into a patch of timber. . . and cut it all out and then they’d move. They were portable. No there was lots of them. Portable stud mills. They’d go into these lodgepole patches.

I can’t ever remember a permanent mill being up Rumble Creek,. (Note: It was much earlier. 1920s. See other narrators, esp. Hollopeter file. Broten is now Doc Berner.)

Rother’s mill used to be a big band. They’d cut out a hundred thousand feet of timber a day. It was big time.

SV: How big was the biggest log you remember. . .
KH: If you found a four-foot log in Swan River, that was a pretty good sized log. Somebody said there was some larch out of Seeley, a few of them, that was five, six feet. But that’s real rare for Swan River. It ain’t like out on the coast where we logged. Ten, twelve, fourteen feet you know.

SV: Boy it would be something to see that kind of timber after being here.

KH: It was. It’s kinda hard to believe. Crawl up on top of a big stump, big enough to pretty near put a dance floor on, you know. Yeah.

SV: I can see people dancing on a stump like that.

KH: Well, fourteen feet, that’s as big as this kitchen.

SV: Room sized.

KH: Yeah. But they got pictures out there. They had a post office in an old cedar stump. It was all rotten inside. They didn’t have no buildings, so they cleaned that out and put a post office in a cedar stump.

SV: How did you feel coming back to this valley after you’d been out there?

KH: I didn’t like the rain. Rain and rain and rain for days and days and days. Horrible. It never got very cold, in the wintertime. When I got emphysema out there and couldn’t work anymore. I figured hell I’m gonna die, I might as well go back to Swan River and die, where I’m happy.

SV: What was the best thing about growing up here?

KH: Just the country. And the freedom you have in Swan River. We got freedom here that other people just can’t even visualize, you know. Even now, with... years ago we never had no cops. No state patrolman. The only time a lawman ever come through here was when they needed him. All we had was the gravel road. When I was a kid, even in the summertime, if the road’s good, it would take three and a half or four hours just to go to Swan Lake.

SV: Somebody told me all the mudholes had names.

KH: Oh geez. Then in the spring all the mudholes would freeze over. Then they’d break through. Mudhole about that deep, hole right in the middle. Maybe ice about that deep all around it. Then when they finally thawed out, you had mud. If we was going to go to Swan Lake to a dance, we’d leave about three in the afternoon, and get down there about nine or ten at night. Pushing through the mudholes. Mud from one end to the other.

SV: So much for dressing up?
KH: Oh yeah. But we’d all go to the dance. Everybody was about half drunk anyway.

SV: Do you know where the stills were?

KH: No. That was before my time. Now, my dad might have known where they was at. My dad came here in 1919.

SV: How did he get here that early?

KH: He never homesteaded. But him and Roy Fox tried to run cattle down there by Lion Creek (Hulett’s now). Damn near starved to death.

SV: Roy had a place.

KH: I met Roy. Dad and Roy. One winter, they run outta hay. They’d go out and fall all these great big fir trees, full of moss? And the cows would go in there and eat it. That’s what kept the cows alive. Just before spring. They’d go in there and eat ‘er, lick ‘er right up.

SV: What else could you do?

KH: Cows were worth six or seven dollars a head. Straw, if you could find it, would go for fifty dollars a ton. You had to take a horse and sleigh and go get it. So what the hell. Eight dollars a head for cows and fifty dollars a ton for hay. . .

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
(mid-discussion about where his family came from.

KH: You see my dad was born in Iowa. They went to Nebraska in a covered wagon. This was back in the 1800s. They starved out in that big blizzard, 1903? They were into cows. They had quite a few cows. That big blizzard starved them all. Dad said when he was a kid, you could go into a corner of a fence or something and you could run on dead cows for a quarter or half a mile and never jump off cows. Just thousands of them. When they’d start thawing out in the spring, they’d all bloat, you know? Dad said they used to go out there and use them like a trampoline. They’d use cows as a trampoline. They was all bloated you know. They’d bounce from one to the next.

SV: Can you imagine doing that? I can’t. . .

KH: Well, kids had to have fun, you know. You know, just that many. . . how would you like to walk from here to Swan Centre up there and never get off a dead cow? See a cow, as long as she can move, she won’t die. But a lot of them old homesteaders, they built fences, you know. Them cows would come up against the fence and stop. They were dead.

SV: I didn’t know that. You must read a lot. . .

KH: No my dad told me this. See, when my dad was little, in Nebraska, they used to bring big herds. Thousands of head of Texas longhorns in there. Into Nebraska. He said you could hear them longhorn cattle coming for miles. Before you’d ever see ‘em. Even in that flat country. The sound of their hoofs and the horns clacking on one another, you know. He said you could hear them before you could ever see them. Thousands of them buggers. Then when they got up here, they got into that bad blizzard, they run into fences. They wouldn’t fight the fences, of course and they died. They couldn’t keep moving. As long as a cow can pretty much keep moving, she’ll survive, cuz sooner or later she’s gonna run outta that storm. Cuz years and years ago, before they had fences, cattle drifted for, shit, hundreds of miles, you know.

Friend of mine is a gun dealer. One time, he was over here in Montana going to a gun show. Outside of Helena or someplace. Antelope, they come to a freeway fence, hundreds and hundreds of dead antelope, because they couldn’t drift through the storm. They had that woven wire fence alongside the highway? So it stopped them, and they stood right there and froze to death.

SV: You dad’s family must have just heard about some opportunity out here and . . .

KH: Well, just my dad. My dad’s dad died when dad was young. So Dad quit school to take care of his mom. To work. Dad only went to the third grade. Something like that. A school teacher beat him with a hard twist lariat rope, and he kinda quit anyway.
SV: I would quit.

KH: Yeah, beat him with a lariat rope.

SV: Did he ever tell you any stories about what the Lion Creek area looked like?

KH: No not really. It was all open. You could ride a horse anywhere. Pretty. Lots of... kinda like the Gordon Ranch up there, where you could look out through the trees? That’s what this whole country used to be. Until the Forest Service took over and stopped the fires. Then the brush took over. There was a lot of timber. Everybody hated timber, thought it was no goddamned good. Couldn’t raise grass in timber. So they fell it, and tried to make meadows, you know, which was dumb. This was not farm country.

SV: A few people tried. Up on the Roll place.

KH: See, now that’s the old Lundbergh homestead. Lundbergh homesteaded back there. That place where Lundberg’s are now is not a homestead.

SV: They cleared an awful lot of land.

KH: Did you ever heard about the Holland Creek Massacre? You know where that’s at, don’t you?

SV: Warner had shared some of that. He said the graves are where that water is now.

KH: A lot of people don’t know them graves are there. The Indians could probably make him drain that and go down there and get the bones outta there.

SV: Did you ever hear about other Indian graves?

KH: Not really, no. The reason I knew about them was when I was a kid there was no water in that. So I could go down there. There was a sweat house down there.

SV: Was it a round one?

KH: Yeah. It was just a frame, right along side the creek. Then there was five, six graves. They were all marked.

SV: How did they marked them?

KH: Well, rocks, and they had kinda little stick crosses. Because, by the time them Indians died, the Mission over on the other side of the mountains... the Indians were getting pretty well
civilized. I can’t remember when that Mission moved in over there. So they had crosses and you know. . . But that’s one thing Warner and them did do before they flooded the lake. They dug up one grave. They found a few beads and a few bones and I think a knife or two. But there really wasn’t nothing.

SV: I was curious, when the Indians traveled through the valley, there was a couple of main trails that they used, but once they got here, there wasn’t just one or two places they camped. It sounds like they camped in several areas, most of them along the river.

KH: Where there was water. Where they could make their steam baths.

SV: Where you saw the sweathouse, was the creek deep there?

KH: No, not really, no. Spring Creek ain’t very big. Most people don’t even know it exists, because it’s all on private ground. Comes from Underwoods, down through Lundbergs, then just dumps into the river. Probably a quarter of a mile above Kraft Creek bridge, so most people don’t even know what it is. But that’s what they call Spring Creek.

SV: That musta been something when they built that lake in there.

KH: Yeah it was. Gawd that’s hellish (?) fishing in there. But Warner won’t let anybody fish in there.

[End of Interview]