Wyman Schmidt: (Sings) I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad. (laughs) I sing in a barber shop quartet.

Clark Grant: Do you?

WS: Yes.

CG: Wow. I love those. That was a nice way to start. (laughs) I’ve had everybody else start by just saying their name, and the year they graduated, and what their degree was in.

WS: Okay.

CG: Go right ahead.

WS: Hey, my name is Wyman Schmidt. I graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in 1958, went on and did the Master’s work in ’61, and then took a bunch of years off—worked a long time—and then finished the Doctorate in 1980. Those degrees were in soils and silviculture mainly, and forest ecology.

CG: What did you do with those degrees? Where did you end up working?

WS: I worked with the Rocky Mountain and Inter-Mountain Research Stations for the Forest Service at this lab here in Missoula for about half my career, and then the other half over at MSU [Montana State University-Bozeman], the other college here in Montana. We have labs at both of those universities. That’s how I spent most of my work was primarily in forest ecology and silviculture, just like the degrees indicated. We had conducted our own research, but we also sponsored a lot of graduate students, both nationally and internationally, so that was what we had researched mainly. My particular motives—my biggest interest was in large forest ecosystems. Later on, when I moved to the lab in Bozeman, we had a lot of emphasis on high-elevation ecology as it tied into grizzly bear requirements and that type of thing.

CG: Does that kind of work have you out in the woods by yourself a lot?

WS: Yes, it did at the first. Unfortunately, it seems that became decreasingly less as you advanced in your career, so all the new people got all the good jobs on the field. (laughs)

CG: You like going out in the woods?
WS: Pardon?

CG: Do you like going out in the woods?

WS: Oh, I loved it. I loved it all my whole time. Yes.

CG: What is it you like about being out there?

WS: Oh, gosh sakes, the sights and sounds and smells. I’m probably really sensitive to the sounds and the smells. We worked beautiful places. One of our main experimental forests was up by Coram—our experimental forest—which is right near Glacier Park. The other one we had mainly was Tenderfoot Creek Experimental Forest, which is over in lodgepole pine forest ecosystem. We dealt with research from everything from dealing with insect disease problems as related to forest management, growth aspects of trees under different growing stations, and also with things like water use requirements and that type of thing like that.

CG: Looking at something like a large ecosystem in the way that you did and do, do you gain any insight about life in general?

WS: Yes, you sure do because our whole body really is an ecosystem, quite condensed. (laughs)

CG: What are some of those—share your thoughts on that.

WS: You know, one of the things—of course, my main hobby is in music and singing. When you see the harmonies that we can produce through music, it’s almost attuned to the harmonies you see in nature. How everything ties together. If you change one note, for example, changes the whole chord structure in music. If you change one factor in the forest, that effects everything else. The two tie together pretty good, for me at least.

CG: Have you sang all your life?

WS: All my life. Never done anything different. I was in the Air Force during the Korean War. At that time, we ran into people who also had an interest in music. That continued after I got out of the service, and came to Montana and started school. So anyhow, it still continues.

CG: What about your parents? Did they do something similar? Did they go to school?

WS: They were—no. My mother went to what was called a “normal school,” which was kind of like the first year or so college, that type of thing. But my father—no, he didn’t. I don’t think he even had a high school degree or a diploma. Education was a big thing for them, but they didn’t get to experience it much for themselves.
CG: But they wanted to be sure that you did?

WS: Yes.

CG: Are you glad for that?

WS: Totally. Yes. No, I’m trying to do the same thing for my kids.

CG: Are you retired now?

WS: I am retired. I’ve been retired for a while.

CG: What do you do in your retirement, other than sing?

WS: (Laughs) I travel a lot. I was in China a year ago and Africa a year ago before that. New Zealand and Australia the year before that, so I get a chance to see a lot of forest ecosystems. We had a lot of cooperative research, internationally. Particularly in Europe. So we had exchanges of students and that kind of thing, which—that was probably the highlight of my career, working with the international scene.

CG: That had you travel a lot?

WS: Travelled a lot, yes, yes. Mainly in Europe, but some in South America.

CG: What sort of work do you do when you partner internationally like that?

WS: Well we—for example, we were down in South America. We were down there trying to work up science exchanges. The State Department asked us to do that—see if we could work up science exchanges between the US and Chile and Argentina. The other parts were through international research organizations. There’s a group called International Union of Forestry Research Organizations. We were involved with that. We had a close relationship with the University of Münster, Germany, because they’d send us graduate students and things like that, and we’d do the same.

CG: Do you feel that University of Montana prepared you for this life that lay ahead?

WS: I think so. The University of Montana—I got around to a lot of the other universities during my career. I’ve always liked the atmosphere here with respect to openness and willingness to try things. It wasn’t staid, you know. It just like the dean mentioned this morning. I don’t know if you were there at the—the dean mentioned there about how important it is that we communicate not only between each other, but internationally. He made a good point.

CG: Were there any particular stories you wanted to share, coming in here?
WS: Oh, I didn’t have anything particular, but it was interesting when I got out of the Service. There were lots of other people getting out of the Service at the same time—military. Started college, and of course there we were about five or six years behind the students just starting out of high school. It was a strange admixture of 18-year-olds and 25-year-olds, so in a world of different urgency, and getting things moving, and getting it done.

CG: Were you a combat veteran?

WS: I was in the Air Force, and I served—not combat. I was in the Air Force with Russian-targeted intelligence, so that was my work there. It actually helped me later on because some of the stuff that we did—photogram, particularly, and everything—trying to determine Russian targets and things like that.

CG: My, how the world’s changed?

WS: Yes, it sure as heck has, yes. Yes—no, I’ve just been extremely fortunate in my career.

CG: Is there anything you’d wish to impart to students who go to the school now?

WS: I think the main thing is: keep an open mind and don’t get stuck down in narrow things. Keep a broad perspective. I think that’s the main thing. Learn the basic sciences. Those supporting sciences of—the botanical sciences, of course, and zoological ones. Of course, the math and sciences—everybody needs to have more math than what we seem to be getting. Yes, enjoy it, every bit of it that you can get while you’re in college. (laughs)

CG: Because what lays ahead is hard work.

WS: (Laughs) That’s right.

CG: Okay, well, I’d ask that, if you’re willing, just to sing one more short line of something because that sounded so nice.

WS: The one song that we quite often—as I lead sing-alongs and stuff like that—the one common song that, regardless where you go—even down in Argentina, I ran into this. (Sings) You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are gray. (laughs) That’s a common song. I don’t care what audience, everybody knows it.

[End of Interview]