This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.
Edd Nentwig: Today, we’re going to do an interview on trapping with Willis Kent. We’ll start at the beginning. Do you want to tell me where you were born and what year?

Willis Kent: I was born in Missouri in 1926. I was born right on the Mississippi riverbank of the Mississippi River.

EN: Was there a town there?

WK: Yes, there was a little town about five miles away of Elsberry, Missouri in Lincoln County. My father was a trapper. My grandfathers, on both sides, were trappers. I just naturally grew up to be a trapper. It started out when I was first starting school at seven years old. That’s the year that I started trapping. I started trapping skunks and weasels on the way to school.

EN: Where did you get your first traps?

WK: My dad being a trapper, he had quite a few traps. He gave me all of the little ones that were weak enough that I could set. They were pretty small because I wasn’t a real big kid anyhow. The only way I could set them, I’d have to get up and stand on them, and use all of my weight to compress the springs. They would hold a skunk now and then. Sometimes, the skunk would pull out of them, but I usually caught them. Several times, I got sent home from school because the teacher didn’t like the smell that I left around the stove when I would warm up my feet.

EN: It got a little smelly?

WK: It got a little bit smelly.

EN: What was the main reason that your granddads and your dad trapped?

WK: That was just a way of life. That’s the way that we made our living. All of our income in the wintertime came from trapping. Granddad was a commercial fisherman all of his life. My dad commercial fished part-time and farmed. In the wintertime, the only income was from fur. At that time, it was a very hard time, during the Depression years. A man worked for a dollar a day if he was...if he had a good job, he made a dollar a day. During the Depression, a skunk would bring three dollars. Coons were bringing six or seven dollars. That was a whole week’s wages for a grown man.
EN: How did you learn how to make your first set?

WK: From going with my dad. I went with my dad when I was three or four years old. A lot of times, I’d get so tired he’d have to carry me home. I went with him anyhow. I’d learned that I was really interested in trapping because I had grown up with it. My granddad, my uncles, and my dad, they’d set around and tell stories about trapping. I got interested in it. Naturally, I wanted to catch something too. I think the first thing I ever caught in my life was my old tomcat.

EN: Is that right?

WK: Yes. My dad made me a little hobble trap to catch rabbits with. We were catching cottontail rabbits to eat. I got up one morning and went out there. It was just daylight. I was looking for that rabbit was in that box. I look in there, and I see that fur. When I raised that door up, I just raised the door up enough to get my hand in there and catch that cottontail. I brought my hand back in there, and it wasn’t a cottontail. It was a possum.

EN: Is that right? (laughs)

WK: That sucker got me by the finger, and he wouldn’t turn loose.

EN: He bit you pretty good?

WK: He really bit me, like to take my finger off. I had to holler. Finally, dad came out and helped me get him out of there. He just sawed up on the hunter (?), and he wouldn’t turn loose at all. That’s the way I really got started trapping. As years went along, when I was 12 years old, my mother and dad separated. My dad had a bad problem with drinking. They separated. Then, I had to help mother make a living. The year that I was 12 years old, during Christmas vacation, I made over 200 dollars trapping. That was 1938. Two hundred dollars was a lot of (?) then.

EN: A lot of money.

WK: As I remember, it was about 240 dollars that I made over that Christmas vacation, which was two weeks.

EN: What was the main animal that you trapped then?

WK: I was trapping everything that I could catch, but muskrat, skunk, and coon. I caught one fox in that time. In fact, that was the first fox I ever caught in my life. I was 12 years old. I caught a lot of skunks, and I caught several coon, some mink, and muskrat. This was all on foot. I didn’t even have a horse to ride then. I walked a trapline five miles long. I’ll never forget that I came in Christmas day, and I always thought that was one of the best Christmas presents that I ever got.
I went out and checked my traps. I caught eight or nine muskrats, and I skinned them on the line, and carried them in my coat pocket. I caught two or three skunks and a big old coon. I carried them all the way home. I was about four miles from home when I finally got the last ones. I carried those all the way home. I was so happy that I didn’t even realize that I was tired because I caught so much that day. I always thought that was one of the best presents that I ever got for Christmas.

As time went on, I trapped every year. The only time, up until this time, I’ve missed one year in my life trapping. That was the year that I was in the service. I was gone one winter, complete winter. I didn’t trap any. It seemed like every winter there was always something that I wanted, other than just to help make a living. I’d want to buy me a rifle or something. That’s the only way that I could make the money. I’d get out and catch fur to do that. As we grew older, and I got married, I got to where I needed to trap. I was like dad then. I had to make a living in the wintertime.

EN: How old were you when you got married?

WK: I was 20 years old when I got married.

EN: Did you live at home and trap from when you were 12 to 20 pretty much?

WK: Yes. I trapped every year and I lived at home. I helped my mother. I had two brothers that were still in school. I helped her put them through school. A lot of that money came from off the trapline. Mother got remarried again in 1943. My stepdad and I trapped together, then, for two or three years. We brought in a lot of money.

EN: Was he a trapper, too?

WK: He was a trapper, too. He was a very good trapper. He was one of the best mink trappers that I’ve ever been associated with. He told me the reason I couldn’t catch mink like he did was because I didn’t smell like a mink.

EN: He figured you had to smell like one.

WK: Yes. He said, “You’ve got to smell like one, so you can catch one,” but I don’t believe that because I still don’t smell like a mink and I can catch mink. Anyhow, we had a lot of fun on the trapline and we caught a lot of fur.

I don’t remember the exact year of it now, but I was about 13, I think or maybe 14 years old. I shipped a bunch of fur to F. C. Taylor [Fur Company]. I won a prize for the best handled fur. I got a dozen number one and a half Victor traps and a little certificate for the best handled fur. I was so happy with that. I would sure like to have that certificate. We had a fire, and I guess that’s where I lost it because I never did find it again. I would like to have that today, just to
show that kids can get prizes. My granddad had taught me how to square stretch coons. That’s why I won the prize: on muskrats and coons. I was really tickled over that. That brought a real good prize, too.

After I got married, I trapped for several years there in Missouri. It must have been about 1949 when I first started to trap coyote and wolf. There’s a lot of wolf there in that country (?). They were killing hogs around. They were killing the pigs, a few sheep, and chickens. Some of the farmers got to wanting me to come around and trap for them. They knew that I had been very successful at trapping. I started trapping wolves and hunting them.

In 1950, I was down in Tennessee. I was driving truck then and hauling steel. I took a load of steel in to a guy in Savannah, Tennessee. I got there late in the evening. The guy said, “We can’t unload it tonight. You might as well stay all night. Come in and have some supper, and we’ll just unload that in the morning.”

During supper, we got to talking about hunting. He said, “Do you like to hunt fox?”

I said, “Yes, I like to hunt fox. Anything. Trap them. I do a lot of trapping.”

He said, “It’s a lot more fun to hunt them.”

I said, “I kind of like to listen to dogs run too, but I’m not that crazy about it.”

He said, “No, I don’t do that. I call them.”

I said, “You call them? What do you mean you call them?”

He said, “I’ve got a little whistle that I blow in and get them.”

I laughed at him, and I thought he was plumb silly. Ain’t nobody can call a doggone fox. He said, “After supper, we’ll go out and I’ll show you.”

After supper, we went out in the shed there. He had a big garage there. He had one side of that that was nothing but solid fox ears, from almost to the floor to the ceiling, and a full length of one wall. It must have been 300 or 400 sets of fox ears hanging on that wall. I asked him, “What do you with them?”

He said, “There’s a two dollar value on them in Tennessee”—in that county there in Tennessee. He collected two dollar value on them. Then he showed me this whistle that he had. It was a little old black plastic thing. It was called Pied Piper. He blew on it and showed me how it was. I just laughed because ain’t no fox going to come, and, if you blow something like that, he’s going to run away from you. (laughs) He kept trying to convince me that that’s the way he killed them.
EN: What kind of noise did it make?

WK: It sounded terrible to me. If I had been out in the woods, it would have scared me. It sounded like just somebody blowing on an old tin horn. I knew there wasn’t no fox coming to that, but he swore that that’s the way he killed them. I had been reading some stories about the Burnham brothers and their calling. They had started that down in Texas.

He wanted to take me calling the next morning and I didn’t have time. I had to be somewhere else with the truck, so we didn’t get to go. Then I went down to Texas with a load of steel. I had read a story about these Burnham brothers. I called one of these Burnham brothers up and asked him about this. He said, yes, he’d done a lot of calling. I asked him what kind of whistle he used. He said he used his mouth.

I said, “How in the world can you…” He told me he could squeal like a rabbit with his mouth. I said, “How in the world do you squeal like a rabbit with your mouth?”

He said, “It’s something that I can’t tell you how to do. You just have to learn it.” He said, “There ain’t no way that I can tell you. I can’t even tell my own brothers. He can’t squeal either, but we’re making some whistles that will do it.”

I started that day trying to learn how to squeal like a rabbit. It took me almost two years before I learned how.

EN: Is that right? How did you practice?

WK: I was going down the road in the truck at night. I’d get sleepy. I’d just try everything I could think of. I’d whistle. I’d try to squeal, holler, and everything else. I couldn’t get nothing that’d sound like a rabbit. I was going down through Minnesota one night in a real bad snowstorm. I could only drive 10, 15, miles an hour, and I couldn’t see the road. I was trying everything. First thing you know, I came up with this squeal that sounded like a rabbit. After that, it was plumb simple, but before I could never do it.

I went home. I got back down to Missouri. About halfway between Louisiana and Clarksville, Missouri, another fellow and I had a boat and motor shop. I pulled in there. I run down to the shop. I got my shotgun and I went up on the hill to try that call out. Just up behind the shop a ways there, there was an old sawmill and a slab pile. I crawled up on that slab pile and tried my whistle. I squealed two or three times.

I had no more than got through my squeal, and I saw an old fox coming down off the hill. There was an old log road there, and he was coming to that log road. About the time he came into that log road from up the hill, another one came into it from the downside, on the lower side of the hill. Here they come, one and one tracking one or the other just as hard as they come right
straight to me. That’s when my fox hunting...my calling started right there. I killed both of them, and I was back down to the house. I wasn’t gone 15 minutes, and I was back down there with two foxes. That partner of mine—he couldn’t believe it. (laughs)

EN: Pretty quick.

WK: There was no value to a fox hide at all then. You couldn’t even give one away. There was no bounty in Missouri. They were so thick that they were just a nuisance. I started hunting fox then every time I got a chance. I killed lots of fox that year. I don’t know how many I killed. The first month after I learned to squeal, I killed 36 that month. There was several days that I killed 12 or 15 in a day’s time, later on, after I really got to hunting.

Even when I was in the trucking business, in the wintertime, I’d take off and trap. It’s just been a way of life with me. Ever since I was big enough to go set one, I’ve been doing it. I moved out to Montana in...winter of 1961, I guess it was.

EN: What prompted you to move from Missouri to Montana?

WK: I had been living there on the river all of my life. I had a real bad problem with a sinus condition. I had a doctor friend that had duck hunted with me, out of St. Louis. He moved to Great Falls, Montana. After he got out there, he wrote to me. It only said, “You ought to come out and visit a while and see if it won’t help that sinus condition.”

In 1958, I decided that...I was commercial fishing there. The fishing had got so bad. There was so many pollutants getting into the river that the fish were dying. I got up one morning to go check nets. I saw right in above the lock on dam number 24 there at Clarksville there was about 15 acres of nothing but dead fish laying in there. It was caused from a run off of a flood on Salt River. They’d been using herbicides and insecticides there. I figured that was time for me to quit fishing. I took my nets up. I took the nets up, loaded up the car, by myself, and went out to Great Falls to visit this doctor friend of mine. I stayed out there for a month and got to feeling so good. The sinuses never bothered me none at all. I went home with the intention of going right back. I wound up staying two years before I did go. I finally just sold out all of my fish and tackle, sold furniture, the house, and everything, and just moved.

EN: Did you trap during those two years?

WK: I trapped there too then. I trapped there in Missouri for those two years. In fact, that was one of the best winters I think that I’ve ever had. It was fun. I didn’t make as much money. I’ve made a lot more money, but we sure had a lot of fun. It was three of us. Charlie Holland, Bob Scurvin (?), and I trapped together. We caught over 500 coons.

EN: Holy cow.
WK: You talk about a pile of grease. There’s a lot of grease come off of them suckers. We trapped a refuge there. They had just opened it up to trapping, and we got in there early. We caught 2,800 muskrats out of there in 15 days. It was really some trapping.

Very few people was using the Conibear 110’s then for trapping muskrat. I was one of the first ones. In fact, I bought the first dozen that Mark Morris in Louisiana ever got into his sporting goods store there. They were just something new that nobody knew anything about. Everybody else was digging holes in ‘rat [muskrat] houses, and tearing up the houses, and not catching them either. We went in there, and we ran them around the clock. We’d take turns running them. We were catching 200 or 300 ‘rats a night. Somebody was busy skinning the whole time. We sold fur that year...we had pretty close to 100 beaver that we’d taken too. The beaver, as I remember, only averaged about eight dollars apiece. Then, eight dollars was worth more than what the beaver’s worth now. Beaver now is not worth hardly anything.

We had a tremendous winter that year. Just a lot of fun. We did quite a bit of coon hunting. We had some pretty good dogs. We did a lot of coon trapping. I know, one night, we took the dogs and went down along the river on the islands there. We hit two different islands. We came in with 21 coons. That was one of the best nights I ever had coon hunting.

EN: Did your dad hunt with dogs?

WK: Yes, we’ve always had dogs.

EN: That was just part of the trade.

WK: That was part of the equipment. You had a good coon dog. Everybody had a good coon dog. I’ve always enjoyed coon dogs, but I prefer trapping. I would rather trap that I would hunt. There’s just something about it. I get a lot of kick out of outsmarting some animal that thinks he’s so smart, like a coyote. After I moved to Montana, then I really got into the coyote trapping.

EN: What did you do that first year in Great Falls?

WK: I went out there. I’m one of these guys that’s never been out of a job in his life. Whenever I’d run out of an occupation, I’d just change my hat and change my occupation. I talked to a friend of mine out in Great Falls. He told me, “If you want to come out and go to work, I’ve got a carpentry job for you.” He was foreman for one of the big outfits there that was building houses there in Great Falls. I never carpentered before. I knew how to drive a nail, but I wasn’t really a carpenter. I went up and joined the carpentry union anyhow. I took the carpenter test and passed it. I moved to Great Falls and went to work for Kessner Construction Company out there. I worked all up through the spring. I went to work for him...in April, I think it was, I moved out there. I went to work for him.
When I got out there, he had a brand new house for me to move into. I went in there that night and stayed overnight. I moved the furniture in the next day. The next morning, I went to work. I carpentered until December 3 that year. I got laid off because of bad weather. I went down and signed up for an unemployment check. That’s what they recommended I do. So I went and signed up for an unemployment check, and that’s the only one I’ve ever signed up for in my life.

The next day, after I signed up for the unemployment check, a fellow I’d been working with…he’d lived there all of his life and knew the country. We’d been talking about trapping. I had traps and everything, and he knew the country, so we made a deal. He’d never trapped before. He didn’t know anything about trapping, but he knew the country, and I had the traps, so we went partners. He had an old Ford pick-up there, so we built a camper on the back of that.

EN: What was his name?

WK: Bob Schlee (?). We had talked to the Fish and Game Department, and they had some beaver that they wanted trapped down in the Judith Basin. We fixed that old pick-up up and went down there. We had quite a year trapping that year. I’d never trapped in that country before, but it was…I knew how to trap beaver and everything. I had done quite a bit of coyote trapping. The coyotes weren’t worth nothing. You couldn’t hardly give a coyote away then. The bobcats were so thick that they were just everywhere. You couldn’t set a trap on dry land without catching that darn cat. I don’t know how many cats we caught that year, but a lot of them we didn’t even skin. They weren’t even worth skinning. A big cat would bring about four and a half. For a good cat.

EN: Four and a half dollars?

WK: Four dollars and a half, yes. I had one real big, old tom there. I think I got seven dollars for him.

EN: When you say you trapped a lot of coyotes…when did you catch your first coyote?

WK: The first coyote that I ever caught was back in Missouri. I don’t remember the exact year of that, but it had to be about ’47 or ’48, the winter of ’47 or ’48.

EN: How did that happen?

WK: I caught him in a fox trap.

EN: Did you?

WK: Yes, I was trapping fox. I come up on that old boy and I thought…one of the neighbors over there had a police dog. I seen that coyote in there, and I thought for sure that I had that old
boy’s police dog. Then I got up close and I could see that it wasn’t. I still wasn’t sure because we hadn’t had too many coyotes around there. In fact, I hadn’t even seen one. That was the first coyote I had seen around that country. There was some of these red wolves around there. I finally killed the coyote and took him in and it was the talk of the country around there for a long time. Nobody had seen one of them around there. I killed a lot of wolves there in that time, and I trapped several. All of a sudden, the coyotes just started getting thick.

EN: What do you think caused that?

WK: They migrated in.

EN: Where from?

WK: From the West. There was a lot of coyotes in Kansas. They just kept working east, like they’ve done now. Coyotes are in every state in the United States right now. They just continue to get thicker and thicker everywhere you go. They done the same thing there: they just multiplied until they started inbreeding with the red wolf. Now, we don’t have any red wolves, and that’s the reason because they just inbred and bred their self into extinction.

EN: When you went out with your dad and you were learning how to trap, how did the day like that start? What was your first few days trapping? How did it go?

WK: One thing that I could remember of, when I was going to go with dad, I would go to bed at night. All I could do was talk about trapping at night. I couldn’t sleep. Then, in the morning…I just couldn’t wait for morning to come, so I could get up and go with him. I remember going and I would get so tired that I couldn’t hardly walk. My legs would get to hurting from walking, and he’d carry me, but, the next morning, I was rearing to go again. I was always so excited. I would run and peep...we trapped along the riverbank a lot. We’d walk atop this bank and look down over the riverbank. I can remember just running ahead of Dad and looking over that bank just to see what was in that trap. I knew right where every one of them traps was. I was only three or four years old, but I knew right where every one of them traps was at.

EN: You never forgot one.

WK: I never forgot one.

EN: Did he take a lot of patience in teaching you?

WK: Yes, he was very patient with it. I have to give him a lot of credit for that. He was very patient. I had another teacher that was very good, too. My granddad on my mother’s side was one of the finest trappers that’s ever been on the Mississippi River. He took a great interest in me and helped me. In fact, I trapped partners with him two or three winters.
EN: What was his name?

WK: Frank Tadlock (?). He’s known all up and down the Mississippi for one of the better commercial fisherman and trapper. He’s a good hunter and everything.

EN: Did you make your own baits then or did you buy them?

WK: No, we didn’t buy any then. We didn’t have any money to buy any with. We made everything. Granddad made the baits, and I just went with him and helped him. From that, I learned how to make a lot of buried baits from him.

EN: When you came to Montana, you were pretty well educated.

WK: Yes, I knew how to trap them all then. It was some of the things that I hadn’t trapped, but it wasn’t long before I found out how to trap them.

EN: That first year trapping beaver with your partner, did you do pretty good?

WK: We caught a little over a hundred beaver. I don’t remember the exact number, but a hundred and three or four. Somewhere along that. We trapped up Judith Basin country and trapped on the game range there. Moved some of them fox...beaver. We took several coyotes out of there, too. The coyotes were bothering the elk in there. They had a big elk herd in there.

EN: What game range was that?

WK: I can’t think of the name of it now. It’s there in Judith Basin. I guess...

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
EN: So you were trapping the Judith [River] Game Range?

WK: Yes. They had planted a bunch of beaver in there. There were times when the game warden would get a trouble call on the beaver. They would go trap them and take them up in that hill country. They just got too many in there, so they had to take some out of there. We went in there and thinned them out. There was some nice beaver in there in that high country—just real dark, silky beaver. Then we moved down the Judith River there, and we took quite a few off there.

They got one fellow that came up to the game range and wanted somebody to trap his beaver. He said, “There must be 100 beaver in there,” because they was cutting all of these cottonwoods down.

I went down there and looked at them. After I looked at them, I told him, “You’ve probably got eight beaver.” He couldn’t believe that. There had to be more beaver than that there. I said, “You want me to catch them all?”

He said, “No, I don’t want you to catch them all. Leave a couple so that they keep the pond alive, but get them out. You’re going to take a lot of them out of there.”

I said, “If you take a lot of them out of there, you’re not going to have no beaver at all because there’s only about eight beaver there. There’s two pair of old ones there and that’s all—and their kits. That’s all that’s there.”

EN: How did you tell their ages and sizes?

WK: You can tell by their activity where their houses, their lodges, are and their feed caches, how much they’re storing. You can tell. Look at the sign on the bank and tell that there’s a bunch of kits there. There’s only a couple of old ones at each one of the lodges. There’s two lodges there. There was probably two kits to each lodge and there was two old ones in each lodge. I went in there and I took six beaver out, and then I watched it. I’m pretty sure that two was all that I left in there. Anyhow, I stopped all of the cutting.

When I was dropping those beaver out of there, I have never seen any more minks around one place than there was around those ponds there. I took 15 mink out those beaver ponds there. The place was just overrun with mink. It’s the only time that I ever had a beaver ate up by mink.

EN: They ate your beaver?

WK: They ate one of the beaver up that I got there. It was a small beaver, and they just ate that booger up. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen them eat that. I’ve had them eat muskrats a lot.
of times, but that was it. They had ate him so bad that you couldn’t save the hide at all. They had ate at least half of the meat off him. Those were some of the biggest mink I’ve ever caught too and some of the biggest around mink.

EN: Were there pretty good prices that year?

WK: Mink, I can’t remember exactly. It seems to me like it was 26-28 dollars for a good male mink that year. There was more money in mink than there was in anything else that year. ‘Rats were about a dollar and a half a piece. We moved back onto the Missouri River then and trapped for a good while. We caught quite a few coon along there.

EN: Whereabouts on the Missouri?

WK: Around Ulm, Montana. Right on the Missouri River there, west of Great Falls. I had a boat, so we trapped from the boat there. We caught some awfully big beaver in there. After I trapped all that country, I worked in Great Falls. After the next year then, the next spring, I bought a service station. I ran that service station there for about four or five years and trapped every winter too while I was in the service station. It helped to support the station and the family and everything else.

I trapped that area from Great Falls to Ulm. By river, it’s about 30 miles; by road, it’s only 11 miles. Every year that I trapped that, I took a hundred beaver off of that. When I hit 100 beaver, I just quit. I took quite a few mink and ‘rats. Fox—there was a lot of foxes along there. I caught quite a few fox. And coon. Just every winter, I’d go in there and take 2,000 or 3,000 or 4,000 dollars’ worth of fur out of there. Then I’d quit. There was nobody else trapping in there.

In the meantime, I sold that service station after about four years and moved to Seeley Lake.

EN: What prompted you to move to Seeley?

WK: We bought a dude ranch up there. We’d had a ranch...Bob Schlee (?). It was partly when I was trapping. Him and I went into the service station business together. Then we bought a ranch up at Lincoln, did some packing and outfitting, went into the outfitting business. We decided that we’d go full time in the outfitting business. We sold the ranch at Lincoln and bought one at Seeley Lake and then moved over there. There is where trapping saved my bacon.

If you’ve lived in Seeley Lake, you know what it’s like in the wintertime. There ain’t much going on. It was either trap or not eat, so I did a lot of trapping. When I first looked at that country, I thought that was the greatest trapping country I’d ever seen. Boy was I wrong. That’s some of the hardest and poorest trapping I’ve ever been into. It just took an awful lot of work; a lot of miles on snowshoes. At that time, I didn’t have a snow cat. I’d sure wished I had it, but I couldn’t afford one. I walked and trapped coyotes. Coyotes were bringing 15 dollars then.
When I got 15 dollars for coyote, I thought I was in heaven. I’d never got that before. It was always before that if I sold a coyote, I got three or four dollars for it. I made enough money through the winter to keep the kids and the family fed. If it hadn’t been for trapping, I would have just had to move out of there and do something else.

EN: How many kids did you have?

WK: I had six at home then. Six of them married now.

EN: Was your wife and kids...did they become involved in your trapping, too?

WK: You bet, yes. They’ve always been a help to me. One time or another, every one of the kids has helped me trap, and I’ve got five girls and one boy. Some of them girls are better skinners and trappers than a lot of the men are.

EN: (laughs) Is that right?

WK: That’s right.

EN: Your wife became involved too?

WK: Yes, she’s helped me sew them up, stretch them, and anything that she could do to help. It’s been a family project and it’s really been good.

EN: Those first years at Seeley were pretty tough for you.

WK: They were tough, yes. They certainly were. You’d work all summer, putting up pay, so that you could feed it all out in the wintertime. You pack what little packing you can do. The horses eat up all the profit in the wintertime. You didn’t have any income. The total income in the wintertime was just all from trapping. I worked in the sawmill some and helped there; sawed timber in the woods. I built roads with a bulldozer for the logging outfits. Anything to make a living. In the wintertime, when that all shut down, you had to go back and get the old traps out. That’s the only way a man could make a living.

We stayed up there for four years. I had a kind of a falling out with my partners. What really happened there was that I met the Lord while I was up there and I got saved. There’s something about that: when you get saved and you got an unsaved partner, you don’t get along too good for long. You start looking and seeing some of the crooked things that’s going on. You don’t like it and they don’t like it. The first thing you know, you got to part company, and that’s what we did. I moved back to Great Falls then and bought back the same service station that I had before. I worked the service station through the summer and trapped through the winter.

EN: Right there in the same stretch?
WK: Right there in the same place. I trapped Freezeout Lake. I trapped that Freezeout Lake for twelve years out of Fairfield. I took a lot of ‘rats out of there. One year, I took 1,700 ‘rats out of there in 21 days.

EN: Oh my god...

WK: That was a lot of skinning. I was trapping by myself. My daughter—my second daughter, Marilyn—went with me. During Christmas vacation, she went up and stayed with me and helped me skin. We skinned an awful lot of ‘rats. ‘Rats weren’t worth a lot. I got them around Christmastime. I tried to sell them in Great Falls, and they offered me 90 cents for them. I tried to get a dollar. I would have sold them for a dollar a piece. They wouldn’t give me a dollar round for them.

I called a fellow, a fur buyer in Missouri that I knew. I told him what I had. He said, “Well, I’ll tell you…” he said, “Are they stretched?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “Good, I don’t want them stretched.”

I told him that I just skinned them and put them in deep freeze. He said, “That’s the way I want them.” He said, “I’ll give you a dollar and thirty-five a round for them. Nose count. No kits, no colds.”

I said, “I’ll be there just as soon as I can get there.”

We had an old station wagon, an old Ford station wagon. I loaded up 1,700 muskrats, six kids, and my wife, and we went to Missouri.

EN: Back to your old stomping grounds.

WK: We went back for Christmas, yes. One dollar and thirty-five cents a round. Pretty good money.

EN: He paid it to you.

WK: You bet. He told me then, “I’ll take all you get next year too.” And he did. I took them back there for four or five years in a row then. The last year that I took them back there, I got 87 cents apiece for them. I had 900-some ‘rats and got 87 cents apiece for them. I decided then it wasn’t worth it. I had kept these ‘rats under control. I kept them controlled pretty good in that Freezeout area. The manager up there—he let other guys trap. But, if they didn’t catch what
they was supposed to catch out there, he’d put me in there too, and I’d catch them. When I got 87 cents apiece for them, I just couldn’t afford to do it no more.

Next year, I didn’t trap them. I went for two years, and I didn’t trap them. Those ‘rats got disease. They got so thick in there they got disease, and they died out. I went back up there. The ‘rat price came back up a little and I went back up to trap then the following year. There wasn’t enough rats there to amount to nothing. They just died off. I picked up some of the ‘rats and had them sent to Bozeman to see what was the matter with them. They had big old sores on them. I don’t they really knew their self. I don’t they ever did figure out what was wrong with them.

EN: They just died.

WK: They just died. They never gave a report back to me of what it was. They just died out. It took them several years to get those ‘rats starting to come back in there. That’s what happens whenever you get overpopulation. Disease just sets in, and it just controls them. They’re going to control them one way or the other. If you don’t trap them, something else is going to control them. They just completely died out. Of course, there’s enough feeder ditches and things there that there was enough came back in to restock it, but it took several years to get a stock back up to where it was any good for trapping at all.

EN: What did you do that winter when you found out the ‘rats weren’t there?

WK: That’s when I really started trapping fox and coyote. The price was starting to come back up a little bit.

EN: What year was that?

WK: That would have been about ’69. The prices were starting to come back up a little bit. I started trapping fox in around irrigation project country up there around Fairfield. There was quite a few fox in there. They...we better go back here to this first starting of the fox. In 1962 or ’63, the first year that I trapped up there, Dale Witt was the manager. I was talking to him one day. He said, “There’s something killing my call flock down there.” Geese, he had a bunch of geese down there in a pen for a call flock. He said, “Something’s been killing them buggers. I wish you’d go down there and see if you catch him.”

I said, “Well, I’ll go look.”

EN: Call flock—what’s that?

WK: It’s a bunch of decoy geese, so that you get the geese to toll in there. The geese come in and roost on that lake. They hunt out there too on the north end. The north end is open and they’ve got an area that’s closed. That’s where these geese were at.
I went down there and looked around. I found some fox sign. I went back and told Dale that there was fox in there. He said, “No, I don’t think so. There’s never been a fox around here.” I went down and made two or three sets. I came back the next morning, and I had two big old fox. I’ve got a picture of those somewhere. I took them up there and Dale hung them up in his shop. Everybody around the country there, they’d heard about them and come look at them fox. There just wasn’t any fox in that country. By ’69, there was getting to be a lot of fox.

EN: They were moving into that area.

WK: They had moved into that area and they’d really multiplied. Then, coyotes were starting to come in there too.

EN: Where were the fox and coyotes coming from do you think?

WK: Just surrounding country. Then they come into that refuge there because there were lots of ducks and things in there for them to eat; ideal place for them to stay. Up in those irrigation projects, too, there was a lot of it in there, a lot of cover in there, a lot of places for denning. Ideal place. They really multiplied.

The first year that I trapped up there—that is, when I started dry land trapping for fox and coyote—I didn’t realize that there was so many coyotes around there. Then I started picking up coyotes in my fox sets. So I went to trapping coyotes then and started catching quite a few. I’d get...when I first started trapping, a lot them would bring seven or eight dollars. This wasn’t really worth the trouble of putting my time into them. It’s not an easy job to skin and stretch a coyote. It takes a little work. By the time you run all over the country after them, you’ve got to make a little money out them, and there just wasn’t much money in them. I trapped them mostly because I enjoyed trapping them, and some of the ranchers wanted me to catch them, too. I’ve always been a sucker for these ranchers wanting me to help them.

EN: Help them out.

WK: Yes, it seemed like every place I would go, somebody was wanting me to catch some coyotes, fox, or something for them. They’ve got a fox getting their chickens or coyotes getting their sheep. I had a Hutterite colony up there out of Dutton. They wanted me to come in there and catch some of them coyotes that was catching their sheep. They were really killing a lot of those sheep. I went in there and caught a bunch of those coyotes. Those people, they just think there ain’t nobody in the world like me anymore.

EN: Is that about the first time you started working predator problems?

WK: That was the first I had worked it in Montana. I had worked it back in Missouri, but that was the first I had worked it in Montana. I would just do it on my own. I wasn’t working for
anybody. All I got out of it was just a hide. I made a lot of good friends and it got me into a lot of
good beaver trapping, muskrat and everything too. I could go back up there right now and
they’d just welcome me with open arms because they were really tickled to get some help.
They were hurting. The government trappers hadn’t given them any help.

In fact, the government trapper, I think, has done more harm than he done good. I went in
there and there was three legged dogs everywhere. He’d set a trap and go off and leave it and
not take care of them like they should. I took several of those three legged dogs out. They were
partly what was giving them trouble. They were killing the sheep. Old cripples, they couldn’t do
much else.

I trapped every winter there while I was at Great Falls. Then, ’65 I guess it was...'74, I’d gotten
out of the service station business. There wasn’t no money in the service station business
anymore; too many people getting into it. So I got out of the service station business. I heard
that they was wanting a government trapper. I called down to Billings and talked to the
assistant supervisor down there. He said, “Yes, we could use a trapper.”

I said, “I might be interested.”

He said, “I’ll be up tomorrow to talk to you.”

He came up and talked to me. When I filled out the application there, he wanted to know,
“How much schooling have you had?” I only went through the eighth grade. I put that down
down there, and he looked at it. He said, “I don’t think there’s any need.”

I said, “How come?”

He said, “Well, you’ve only got an eighth grade education. You’ve got to have a college
education.”

I said, “When did they start teaching how to catch coyotes in college?” (laughs)

He said, “They don’t, but it’s just one of the rules. You’ve got to have an education,” he said,
“You might get by if it was just a high school education.”

I said, “I’m sorry. I’ve only got an eighth grade education, and I know how to catch a coyote.”

He said, “Well...” He gave me about two pages of questionnaires there: odds and ends
questions on trapping. He said, “Why don’t you fill this out and I’ll see if I can get past that.”

He went back to Billings. He called me that night. He said, “How soon can you get up to Phillips
County?”
I said, “I don’t know. How soon do you want me up?”

He said, “We’d like to have you up here tomorrow.”

I said, “My goodness, that’s quite a notice there. Here it is eight o’ clock at night and you want me up there in the morning? That’s 200 miles away. I ain’t got nothing packed.”

He said, “How about the next day then?”

I said, “Okay, I’ll be there.”

That’s when I went to work for the government. That was in April, I think. March or April. I worked until June...July 1, I got laid off. The ranchers there in Phillips County heard that I was going to get laid off. One of them called me up and asked me, “If we go to the county commissioners and talk to them about getting you a job as a county trapper, would you go to work for it?”

I said, “I’ll go talk to them. If they’ll pay me a wage that I can afford to work for them, yes I would.”

They called a meeting with the county commissioners. I went up there, and it was 16 ranchers up there to try to get them talked in to hiring a county trapper. They’d never had a county trapper before. All they had had was government trappers there and they weren’t getting much service from them. These guys were upset. They had the district supervisor and the assistant supervisor of the federal trappers there, too. They agreed that they would hire me. The government would furnish the equipment. That didn’t last very long. It wasn’t very long until they had all their equipment back. They were going to furnish everything, and they never furnished me anything. Anyhow, I went to work as county trapper in there, and I worked for them for six years.

EN: What did you find when you got up there?

WK: I tell you, they had coyote problems. I’ve never seen any worse coyote problems than what they had there. The one sheep ranch...the guy, when I went out and talked to him, Fred Iochana (?), he told me that he had lost 700 or 800 head of lambs the last year. I couldn’t really believe he could lose that many, but, after I was there awhile, I know that he did because the first year that I was there, he lost over 600. That year, from the day that I started there until one year later that same day, I had caught 407 coyotes.

EN: Holy smokes...

WK: Caught and shot together. I never used an airplane or anything. That was all in ground work. I had never seen coyotes like that. A lot of days, I’d go out and drive on the roads and
shoot four, five, six coyotes from the road. It was everywhere you’d go. You’d go out and call, maybe there’d be four or five come at one time.

EN: Why do you think they were so thick?

WK: They had many control workings. Even what had happened in ‘72: Nixon put a ban on 1080. As soon as he took that ban off 1080, they multiplied like flies. You take them old bitches; they have six, seven, pups. It don’t take them long. 1080, I don’t know...I can’t say that I’m against 1080, and I’m not for it the way it was used at one time. I think there’s a place for 1080, really.

EN: You think it’s a useful tool.

WK: It’s a useful tool if it’s right. It’s just like anything else. You give somebody anything that good. First thing you know, somebody is going to mess it up. That’s exactly what happened with 1080. It just got to where people were misusing it. The rancher got ahold of it and he wanted to use it himself—if a little does good, a whole lot will do more. First thing you know, they get it so lethal that it kills anything that breathes. (unintelligible). That’s what’s the matter with it.

This talk about bringing 1080 back now...the way they’re talking about it, putting 1080 in sheep collars and single drop baits, ain’t going to do nothing but cause problems. It ain’t going to help the rancher. Not a big. What’s going to happen: they’re going to legalize 1080 so he can cross state lines and it will be available to everybody. If a man wants it, all he’s got to do is empty them collars out. He’s got enough 1080 there to bait up a whole cow with one collar. I don’t see reason for it at all. The only way that 1080 would be any good would be for them to legalize it. Under a strict supervision of educated personal that they could use to...no individual famer is going to use it at all.

EN: Educated—you don’t mean college education?

WK: I don’t mean college education. They don’t educate that kind of stuff in college. If they did, they’d have an old trapper up there teaching somebody how to do it, but they don’t do it.

EN: What was that first year like out there, trapping at Fred Iochana’s?

WK: I lived at the ranch, at Fred Iochana’s, more than I did at home because he was just having trouble continuously. Fred’s the only big sheep rancher in that country. At one time, Phillips county was one of the largest sheep producing counties in the state, somewhere around 200,000 sheep, and now there’s less than 20,000.

EN: How many was Fred running at that time?
WK: He was running about 6,000 head of ewes. You figure 6,000 head and he lost 600, that’s 10 percent loss.

EN: That’s tough.

WK: That is tough. The coyotes were just unbelievably thick. You could go out there at night and locate. I’d go out there and howl at night, and you could hear 15 or 20 coyotes answer you at any time.

EN: When you say locate, what was the purpose of locating?

WK: Getting the general area of where the coyotes are staying, in the drainage where they’re working. I’d do that a lot: locating areas for trapping or for calling.

EN: How did you learn how to do that?

WK: That’s hard. I learned first with the duck call. That’s the way I learned how to call first. Just by blowing on it and playing around with it. In fact, the first fox that I ever called in was with a duck call. I didn’t know what made that fox come in until years later.

Another fellow and I was setting in a duck blind. It had been a real warm day and the ducks weren’t flying and we were fooling around with a duck call. I was trying to imitate a wood duck. They squeal. We’d been fooling around there with the duck call for a good bit. I just stood up and looked out. There’s an old fox sitting on his butt out there about 30 feet in front of the duck blind, sitting there turning his head from one side to the other and listening. He didn’t know what was going on then. He’d come up there to that call. I know he had. After years later, I knew he had, but I didn’t know it then. That was the first fox I ever called and killed. I killed him with a shotgun there out of the duck blind. That was probably....at least five or six years before I started calling.

EN: You mean started calling with your mouth?

WK: Yes.

EN: And not using a piece of equipment?

WK: Yes. I never used a piece of equipment for years. I just called with my mouth. Hardly, I didn’t buy one call before I came to Montana, but then, when I got out here and happened to call so long, the distance being so long, calling in big country, then it’s a little more hard on the throat. I went then to the predator calls and started using them more. Then I started with experimenting and making different calls. I worked it up until I’ve got a call now that really works.
I enjoy calling, but I think the most fun that I have is checking traps. I just get a kick out of outwitting them old smart coyotes, especially those that’s been killing. I don’t not know if you realize or not, whether you’ve ever trapped a real predator coyote, one that’s a killer. He’s a different type of animal to catch.

EN: How so? What makes him so different?

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
EN: We were talking about what makes a predator coyote. You were saying?

WK: The reason that they’re a different catch...there’s two or three things. One thing, when you’re trapping furs in the fall of the year, in the early winter, you’re trapping a lot of pups. Those pups, they’re pretty stupid. They’re easy to catch. A lot of guys will go out and think they’re a pretty good trapper because they can catch a few little pups.

EN: What makes them stupid?

WK: They haven’t been educated yet. They don’t know anything about traps or people even, as far as that goes. The old ones are just taking them out and getting them educated. Their pups are hungry, so they dive into any old hole they find. In the spring of the year, when lambs are being born, and the coyotes are starting to kill lambs, it’s a different ball game then. All them dummies have done been caught. You’ve got the old smart one out there to try to trap then.

One gets to killing that way he becomes more cagey. I don’t know whether it’s just because he’s afraid that somebody’s going to be after him or kill him, or just if it’s an instinct of the animal. I think it’s a born-in instinct that when they start killing something, they just naturally become more shy and more cautious. You just got to work them different to catch them. You just got to work them different to catch them. You can’t just go out and set it. You don’t catch them old killers in a dirt hole set. They’re not looking for something out of a dirt hole to eat. They’re looking for that fresh warm blood and that’s the only thing that they go after. You’ve got a better chance, really, at calling them and killing them because you’re imitating a wounded rabbit or something in distress. They think they’re going to get some more of that warm blood, so they come to it.

I’ve talked to so many people that have never been out on a real predator control. They think that summertime trapping is easy. That’s where you’re wrong. It’s the hardest trapping there is. I can remember years back when I kind of felt that way myself. It’d sure be nice to go out and trap them in the summertime. The only thing nice about it is the weather because it sure ain’t easy. It’s a lot harder: the hot weather and everything; the grass growing up through your sets; the coyotes are smarter. In the summertime, they’re out catching young rabbits or young lambs or something. They’re not interested in bait and trap at all.

EN: What kind of sets do you like to use if the bait sets don’t work?

WK: About the only thing that really works for a coyote that way is a blind set or, occasionally, a urine set will work. Urine or sometimes I’ll use a little gland that will help some.

EN: Blind setting, what’s that?
WK: Like a trail set. Sometimes I’ll bait a set and put one trap there, like a dirt hole set or something, and then go behind a bush where the coyote will come up and sneak up behind it. I’ll put a blind set back there with no bait or nothing on it. A lot of times, it will take an old sharp dog that way. He outsnares himself. He’ll sneak up behind a bush or something so he can look at that trap that’s setting there. While he’s doing that, he gets his foot in another one. He knows the one’s there because the bait’s there. That’s the only reason he knows it’s there.

EN: They can associate that—

WK: Sure.

EN: —from previous experience?

WK: From previous experience and then it’s an instinct to them. Anytime that they see something like that, they’re cautious of it. I’ve watched a coyote working a set in the daytime. They are so cautious. They sneak around and look that set over; sniff it and walk around to try and get their nose in the wind so they can smell it. You watch a few of them and you know what you’re up against doing your trapping. It ain’t easy to get them old boogers in there close enough to get their foot in that trap.

Then I use a lot of snares. I’d say, in the predator control, I take at least 60 percent of the coyotes that I catch in snares. That fools the sharp ones.

EN: Where did you learn how to snare at?

WK: Mostly on my own. Just experimenting with it. I first started out snaring rabbits when I was just a kid back in Missouri. I’d never done much other snaring back there because it was illegal. When we come to Montana, I started tying our snares myself and making some snares. I ran into Keith Greggerson (?) and we got to talking snares and comparing snares together. I know he’s helped me; I hope I’ve helped him some. It’s got to be a real thing with me. I’d just as soon snare as I would trap in most cases. There’s a place for both, but, in the predator control, there’s more areas that you can use snares than there is traps because it’s pretty hard to set traps in a sheep pen and catch coyotes when the sheep are walking around there all day long.

EN: What would you say would be the basic philosophy of using snares? How are they applied? What’s the application?

WK: In the sheep country, there’s a lot of woven area fence. I do a lot of snaring in the fence...under the fence. They’ll dig a hole and crawl under the fence. I hang a snare in that hole. When he comes through there, he’s there...

EN: Sticks his head in the snare.
WK: He puts his head in the snare. I leave him just enough to jump over the fence, and he hangs himself. It’s a sure thing. You find a hole where he’s coming in, if he comes back there, you’re going to catch him. That’s why on these sheep fences where I have a lot of trouble, I keep snares hanging on them the whole time. They continuously take coyotes. It may go for a month and never pick a coyote up, and then you come along and, first thing you know, it’s got three or four on the same fence.

EN: When you started predator work, there’s a basic difference there in that you started making money just from the act of trapping and not the furs.

WK: That’s right.

EN: The furs weren’t worth any money.

WK: That’s right.

EN: What did you think about that?

WK: I thought it was pretty good. I had been wanting to do that for years and had never had the opportunity. Then I went to work for the government and I was disappointed in that job.

EN: How come?

WK: They didn’t pay enough money and they had too much bookwork to do. They wanted you to do books all the time instead of trap; work an eight hour day or you had to lie on your reports. I just finally told them that I couldn’t do that. I’m going to work from 5 o’clock in the morning until whatever time. I’ll work my eight hours, but I’m going to log it down as the time I worked and not from eight to give. That’s what they wanted you to do.

Jim Hoover called me one time after he looked at a report. He said, “Are you really catching that many coyotes?”

I said, “Jim, if I wasn’t catching that many coyotes, they wouldn’t be on my report.”

He said, “Well, I’m going to have to come up and see how you’re doing that.”

I said, “Come on. Tomorrow will be a good day. You be up here at five o’clock and we’ll go. I’ll be ready to leave at five o’clock.”

“Oh my gosh,” he said, “I can’t go that early.”

I said, “You ain’t going with me then.”
Finally, after talking to him for a while, he decided that he would come. He came up. I told him I’d have breakfast ready and to come on out to the house. He stayed at the motel and then he came out there. I called him and got him up in the morning. He came out to the house and ate breakfast. My boy went with us. We went out and, by ten o’clock, we had nine coyotes. He took us back to town and bought us dinner and I never seen Jim out there again. I guess he decided things were alright.

He seemed to think that, because I was turning in that many coyotes, it was making the other trappers look bad. I told him that I was sorry. I didn’t mean to make them look bad, but I thought that’s what they hired me for. I took 150 coyotes there by the end of June. Then I got laid off. They got a cutback in their funds, and I was only on a temporary basis. They was going to lay me off. It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I went to the county then. I’ve worked county jobs ever since.

I worked up there for six years. We’ve seen a drastic change in the coyotes. We had a lot of airplanes that were flying and shooting coyotes all winter long. The coyote population really went down. Then in...’79 I guess is the first time we seen any signs of parvo [Canine parvovirus] up there. We started noticing dead foxes and dead coyotes.

EN: Parvo is distemper?

WK: Yes. It really hit them hard. Between them and the airplanes, it really cut them down, the fox population especially. In 1980, there wasn’t enough coyotes to keep me busy anymore. All I was doing was poisoning prairie dogs and trapping rabid skunks. I finally told the fellows that I was going to start looking for something else.

Somewhere or another, somebody had talked to Vernon Dorn down in Wyoming. They told them about me. He kept trying to get ahold of me. Finally, Craig Swift called me and told me that he was trying to get ahold of me. I called him. After a couple of phone calls, we made a deal. I went down and talked to him. I liked what he had. He liked my way of trapping. So I went to work for him for Carbon County, Wyoming.

EN: What was his problem?

WK: He’s a supervisor of predator control down there. They don’t have any government control; it’s all county. I worked under predatory Alamo board. That’s formed of six different ranchers: three cattlemen and three sheepmen from the county that are elected as board members. They hire the trappers. They had two trappers there and they weren’t getting the job done, so they were going to hire a third one. I went to work for them and moved into the Baggs area in the southwest part of the county. They had the one trapper in Rawlins and Vernon was in Hanna.
The country down there is a lot different than what we’re used to up here. It’s not open. There’s a lot of brush, a lot of rough country. Lots of jack rabbits, lots of deer, and lots of antelope. A lot of competition for trapping. They’ve really got a coyote problem there. It’s hard to control. They got lots of sheep; a lot more sheep than they got in this country.

I went to work there. The first year I did good, I guess. I caught 199 coyotes. But it seemed like I wasn’t doing very good to me. It was a new country. In the winter, they pulled me off and put me on a helicopter to use the helicopter for predator control. I didn’t get to do much trapping. The helicopter is a good way to control coyotes, I guess. I’d rather trap them, but I can’t catch as many as I can kill.

EN: Even though you were working predator problems during the summers and stuff, when you were dealing with what you said was the predator, the coyote, you trapped them during the fall and winter when they were good furs.

WK: For furs, yes. Everything in the winter. I’d say that’s the thing with helicopter. We don’t go out in the summer and shoot them with a helicopter. We do that to them in the wintertime when the fur is good. All of the fur is harvested then. We figure that we have to take 2,000 coyotes out of the county a year in order just to stay even with them.

EN: When did you first start working with the aircraft and killing coyotes?

WK: The first I did was in Phillips County. I helped some up there in the last couple...the first two years I was up there, I didn’t use the helicopter at all, and then I started using the helicopter. As soon as I went down there, I started in the wintertime.

EN: A helicopter, that’s kind of like 1080 or something: it’s just another tool?

WK: It’s just another tool, yes. It’s a very necessary tool, particularly in those areas like that down there where we’ve got a lot of brush and rough country. You can’t get into it with a fixed-wing plane. You can’t do it catching up with traps or anything else. There’s just no way to control them without using it.

EN: How do you use the helicopter?

WK: You just hunt the coyote and shoot him with a shotgun.

EN: By hunt him, you mean you go out and fly around...?

WK: Yes, we just fly around until we jump the coyote. Then we shoot him with a shotgun.

EN: Is it pretty effective?
WK: Very effective. We don’t lose any. We don’t cripple any that gets away. If we cripple one, we just land and get him. If he goes in a hole, we still land and get him. It’s very effective. It’s the most effective way we’ve got. We don’t work all of the country, but work in the lambing areas and the particular areas around the sheep flocks. A lot of the coyotes that we kill, we actually see them after sheep. I’ve killed a lot of them that have just killed a sheep. It’s not a thing of just going out there and trying to destroy every coyote. We just keep them pinned down enough to where we can live with them.

EN: What are some of the other tools that you use? Do you use M44s [cyanide device]?

WK: We use M44s. In Wyoming, they’re so strict with their regulations that you can’t use them hardly at all. I don’t use them very much except in some of the (?) land right in close to the river bottoms there, where they’re fenced and well protected. That’s about the only I use them now. I used them a lot in Montana.

EN: Did you? Up in Phillips County?

WK: Yes, up in Phillips County.

EN: Are they pretty good?

WK: They are very effective. They are the most selective outfit we’ve got. They’re even more selective than the trap is.

EN: How do they work?

WK: They got a top on them wrapped with wool or paper. I use a paper towel to wrap mine and then I wax it. Inside of that top, the cyanide capsule fits in. It screws on top of a spring-loaded device. It has a 40-pound compression spring in it. These are set in the ground until just the top of the M44 is sticking out. All they can see is actually the bait. The coyote comes along and pulls that. When he pulls that it triggers that mechanism and it shoots that cyanide into the mouth. It takes mostly about 30 seconds to kill a coyote.

EN: Is that right?

WK: That’s right. That’s all.

EN: How do you get him to stick that in his mouth?

WK: He has to have some bait on there that he wants to eat.

EN: How do you get that?
WK: That’s been one of the real sticklers with these things. That’s the reason they haven’t worked really good because a lot of people don’t have the right type of bait. I worked on the M44 program when it first came to Montana in the experimental stages and worked with Ken Saler (?). He was the head of the program at that time. The first winter that I was on that program, I never caught one coyote with them M44s. They gave us some bait. The coyote didn’t really like the bait. He might have come up and peed on it or something, but he wouldn’t eat it. The M44s, they were defective. They rattled whenever the coyote touched it and things. It took a lot of work to get them to where they would work.

I started working on them and remodeling those M44s. Then I started making bait and experimenting with different types of stuff. The second year, I caught a few more coyotes. The last year that we was on the program, there was 40-some trappers… I don’t remember the exact number, but 40-some trappers. I’ve got the report at home. There was 243 coyotes caught in the whole state on M44s. I caught 136 of them. It was just because of the bait. I’d developed a bait that they wanted to eat. It wasn’t something that they wanted to come and roll on or smell and pee on; they wanted to eat it.

EN: How did you find out what would make a good bait? What was your thought when you were doing that?

WK: I have worked with coyotes long enough to know some of things that they really like. I just started compounding baits and mixing them together. I use a bobcat meat base and then the rest of it is secret. It has proven to be a really good lure. A lot of people have used it and they’ve had really good success with it.

EN: When you started working predators, did you stop trapping like beavers and mink? Did it become a bigger part of your life or your trapline?

WK: I have never quit trapping beaver or any of them. I don’t trap them as much. I don’t have the time to. The price of beaver has been way down compared to what I could make trapping coyote or fox or ‘cat or something. I still trap beaver. Some of the people that have problems with them, I help them out.

EN: You’ve kind of changed hats; not only in your work, but in your trapping too.

WK: Right.

EN: Whenever the price doesn’t justify the means.

WK: I’m just like anybody else. I’m not going out there and spend three hours catching a 20 dollar beaver when I can go out there and spend three hours and catch three 100-dollar coyotes. It don’t make sense. You just kind of flow with the current. You can’t spend all your time out there catching beaver when they’re not worth anything.
EN: You spent some time down in New Mexico when you were in Phillips County, too, didn’t you?

WK: I spent three winters in New Mexico, yes, trapping predators there.

EN: Was your job in Phillips County just part-time?

WK: They had a problem there with money. They didn’t have enough money to support a trapper year round. I made a program with them. To start out with, I worked eight months out of the year and had four months off and I trapped at home. I started out trapping it all there in Phillips County until the coyotes got thinned out and then I couldn’t make it. Then I went to New Mexico.

That was really some good trapping down there. It was a little different than what I’d ever been used to. I wasn’t used to trapping in my shirtsleeves except in the summer time. First of the year, we went down there. My son-in-law and I went together. We left Malta and it was 20 below zero when we left there. We pulled into Magdalena and it was 55 above. We were running around in our shirtsleeves down there and those people thought it was cold. Here we were running around in our shirtsleeves sweating. Everybody thought we was crazy.

I enjoyed it. There was an awful lot of new experiences and different things. We would trap in the high desert country. Good coyotes there. Very good coyotes. Excellent catch. The first year we didn’t do much. We spent most of our time looking around. We stayed down there three weeks the first time. We never set a trap for the first 10 days we was there.

EN: What was you doing during that time?

WK: Just looking around. Looking the country over. We did a little calling here and there. Trying to get acquainted. I had a friend down there that was trying...we had to run him down. I couldn’t find him. He was out on a job working. Finally, I went and talked to the government trapper there. I got to be friends with him. He took us out and introduced us to a rancher. He gave us permission to trap a 240-acre ranch there.

EN: So you had plenty of room.

WK: We had plenty of room, yes. There was lots of coyotes in there. But we had to come back home. We went down the next year then. We trapped about ten days, probably. We brought home 30 coyotes and I think 8’cats that first year. That paid for the trip and that was about all.

The next year we went down and trapped. We were all set up when we got there. We took a house trailer with us and moved right in and stayed there. We caught 181 or 182 coyotes and I
don’t remember how many cats it was. It was a good year. We caught right at 20,000 dollars worth of fur and we stayed not quite 3 months.

EN: Your son-in-law went with you again?

WK: Yes.

EN: You’ve always had partners during your career trapping.

WK: No, not always. I’m not much of a partner man.

EN: You’re not?

WK: No. I go…the reason I took the son-in-law was because I was teaching him to trap. It wasn’t a prosperous thing, but he learned how to trap. That’s the main thing. He never trapped at all until he married my daughter. Janice says now that that’s the only reason he married her. So he could—(laughs)

EN: —learn how to trap.

WK: Anyhow, he’s a good trapper now. By the way, he works with me now down there. He’s learned how to trap and he’s got a good trap. We had some good trips to New Mexico. I really enjoyed it.

EN: Do you like to be by yourself when you’re trapping?

WK: You bet. I can outsmart them coyotes better when I’m by myself. I make enough mistakes myself without somebody else out there doing some.

EN: That’s kind of a common trait with trappers: in doing these interviews, most of the trappers are very individualistic.

WK: Yes, they are.

EN: They like their time.

WK: I like the company. If I go trapping with a guy—like if I went to New Mexico with you—I’d love to go down there and just camp together, but we’d run separate lines. You go your way and I go my way. Then we come in at night and we’d tell our stories.

EN: (laughs) Yes, I can imagine how those would go.
WK: That’s the best part about trapping. Like you say, trappers are individualists. I am (unintelligible). I’m not ashamed of it. You just get to realize when you’re out there by yourself. It’s you against the animal and you against the elements. I’ve often thought about what I read in the Bible. God gave us dominion over all these animals. If he hadn’t done that, where do you think we’d be?

EN: Poor shape.

WK: If he hadn’t done that, we’d probably be out there in the shape where that coyote is. He’d be after us instead of us after him. (unintelligible) If we didn’t have dominion over him, we wouldn’t have a chance with him.

EN: Because you and I are friends, I know your abilities and stuff like that. We’ve talked back and forth. How do you feel when somebody...this new surge that seems to be on trappers. They want you to teach them everything you know, and you had to learn it the hard way. How do you feel about that?

WK: I’ve taught quite a few people to trap. I’ve never charged anybody for it. I suppose, over the years, I’ve probably taught 20, 30 different people to trap. So far, of all those people that I’ve taught to trap, I can only recall two that hasn’t skinned me—

EN: —in return.

WK: —in return.

EN: Is that right?

WK: That’s right.

EN: They weren’t very thankful, were they?

WK: No, they weren’t.

EN: I remember one time you and I were out on a line up in Malta. I was asking that question. I don’t remember how you put that. It was something to the effect that you could show me everything you knew and still out trap me. That really struck a chord.

WK: That’s true. It takes a lot of time. I can show you everything that I know, but then you have to put that to action. It takes experience to do it.

EN: It takes confidence too.
WK: It takes confidence. It takes experience. Just because I tell you all these things and show you how to do it doesn’t mean that you can walk out there and look at the lay of the land and say there’s where that coyotes going to travel and this is where I got to put my trap. It takes years and years of experience and getting the ability to think like a coyote does.

EN: Do you think that you have a special ability in being able to do that?

WK: I don’t know. I thank the Lord that I have a talent for it, so maybe I do. I appreciate it.

EN: I would say you are one of the elite predator control people just because of the number of coyotes you are able to take all the time. That’s why I ask you that. It’s kind of fascinating. Sometimes it makes people wonder.

WK: Like I say, I’m lucky. The harder I work, the luckier I get.

EN: It’s been a good life for you so far, trapping, hasn’t it?

WK: It’s been great, yes. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I’m my own boss. I don’t have to look to nobody to make my living for me. I don’t have to stand on a breadline and I never will as long as there’s enough animals. We’ve got a good healthy crop every year. I got my living made.

EN: I remember Tex Baker said one time...First time I ever met you in Missoula at a trapper meeting, he said, “That’s Willis Kent,” he said, “He’s the best trapper I know of. If there was one animal left in the world to catch, he’s the guy I’d go get to catch it.”

WK: Tex is a great old man.

EN: Do you ever think of yourself and compare it to the old time trappers, making a living trapping? That’s not very common any more.

WK: I hear a lot of people say, “Gosh, I wish I could live back there in them days.” About all I can say is I’m glad I’m not living in them days.

EN: How is that? Why?

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
WK: There’s been so many changes. I talked to Tex about this one time. Tex said, “If I still trapped today like I did 40 years ago,” he said, “I’d starve to death trapping.” That is true. There’s been so many changes in trapping and the coyotes have gotten so much smarter. The thing I look at in the whole mess of going back into time…I don’t want to look behind me. I want to look ahead. Everything’s exciting ahead. I don’t want to look over my shoulder. I’ve done seen enough of that. It’s behind me. I want to see what’s coming up tomorrow. It’s just like going out to check the trapline. I checked them yesterday. I know what I caught yesterday. I want to know what’s going to be there tomorrow. No more of this looking back over my shoulder.

I just can’t see about going back. As far as comparing myself with the old time trappers, I think they were tougher than I am. In fact, I know they are. They had to live tough. Living the way we do today, we ride around in four-wheel drives and three wheelers or something: the convenience. They didn’t have that. They walked or they rode horses or they took their boat. That was hard work. That kept them tough. They were made tough then. The man today, the modern day trapper, he isn’t that tough. He might be tough compared to the city man, but he’s not tough compared to the trappers of the old days.

I just got no desire to do it. I don’t know whether I’m a better trapper than they were or if I’m a worse trapper than they were. I think I probably catch more fur than they did at that time, but I’ve got more modern conveniences to do it with.

EN: Speaking of looking forward, what are you looking forward to?

WK: I’m just looking forward to another good year’s trapping. I’ll be trapping as long as I’m able to get out there and go. I think as long as I stay out and get plenty of exercise and get a lot of this good and fresh mountain air, I’m going to be healthy. I’m going to continue to trap just as long as I can.

EN: Your kids are grown and gone from home now. Has that taken some of the pressure off to make the money and get the dollars in there?

WK: That’s right, it has. It’s just made a lot of difference. What I’m working for now is a little retirement for mom and I. I’m not going to go out there and kill myself to do it. I’ll catch my share of it. I don’t want to catch them all; I just want to catch enough to keep the ranchers happy there and as predator control. I want to catch enough so that I can make expenses in the winter time. I think I can do that.

EN: Do you think predator control will always be around?
WK: Yes. There will be coyotes here when you and I are gone. When the last man’s gone off this earth, there will be a coyote to howl over his grave.

EN: That’s giving them a lot of credit.

WK: He’s one smart hombre. It adapts to anything. Look at how they’ve adapted themselves into the city around different places in California and all over. They’ve just moved uptown. You don’t have to worry about the coyote. He’s going to make his way. You can poison him, you can shoot him, you can gun him, you can trap him, you can do anything to him; there’s still going to be enough for seed.

EN: That seems to make a lot of excitement for you—you figuring him out all the time.

WK: I just love to outsmart him. There ain’t nothing better than seeing (unintelligible) one of them old smart ones that you know have been killing them sheep. You come up there and he’s hanging in a snare or he’s got a trap on his foot or I go out there and sit down and call him and here he comes running to get that wounded animal and he meets me instead. They sure get a surprised look on them when they see that, too, like a rabbit.

EN: We’re about out of time, so we’ll close the interview here.

WK: Okay.

[End of Interview]