Diann Wiesner: I’m going to get a few feet of tape on here first. And then I’ll check the sound, see how we’re doing. Today, August 20, 1982, we’re visiting with Herschell Wells in Wise River, Montana. Easy thing to start with Herschell when we talk is, how you started or when you started trapping?

Herschell Wells: I probably started trapping in the early ’30s, say like ’32, ’33, along in there. As a kid you know, trapping muskrats, occasional mink you’d pick up along the stream. In those days, spending money was tight, and so a fur was a big thing. If you got 75 cents per rat, you was in the bucks. You could go to the picture show and buy a candy bar and live pretty high on the hog. I kind of pursued it for years, and then of course, during the military years I didn’t do any trapping then. After I came out, I trapped as a hobby, leisure time, and what not. I probably first became interested in the predators in the late ’40s—cats, fox, coyotes. They’re my pets. I prefer the predator to the water. When I trap the water, that means I have nothing to do. But I do enjoy it. I don’t like skinning those beavers, and I don’t like skinning badgers. To me they’re about the same thing. You can skin a coyote or a fox, and if you punch a hole in him, well, tough, you just got another hole. But you do that to a beaver you know, and well right off the bat the buyer looks and says, “Well, there’s another five-legged one,” and the price of it, the bottom just fell out of the market all together. But the coyote...and most of the coyotes that I have trapped has been in roughly this area—this area, this elevation. Like I say I prefer the open country, but the timber. You have to go to the timber some.

DW: By this area, you mean the Wise River country?

HW: The Wise River country, yes. Oh, like say from here to Melrose, to Wisdom, toward Elkhorn, toward Anaconda. I did trap the Deer Lodge Valley as a kid, some. I was raised in Anaconda so I trapped that valley some, but more in this area than any place. I think maybe that population of them today is a little more scarce than they once were, and there was a time when they had them pretty well beat down with 1080, you know, when that was going on. Since the 1080, I’m sure they came back. Here in the winter so many times I’ve noticed, being interested in them and what not, I’ve noticed that their deer kills. One of their pet tricks that I can see is chasing a deer, get two or three coyotes to single him out and chase him into a drift.

Unidentified Speaker: Into a drift?

HW: Yes, the sop. There on the top, he’s belly deep, but he don’t go far. Until they either ripped his throat or hamstrung him—one or the other. Then, I’ve seen them right up here by the road.
I’ve seen two of them running an old goat down the road one day. No gun. I honked the horn and everything, and they didn’t even look or anything. Run her through the fence. Well, she was all in then, and there was a down spot in the fence and she went run through it. In a 100-yards time she went down. There was no use going after a rifle then, they might as well have her. On another occasion right here by the ranger station in broad daylight...Well, both instances were during the afternoon, and they killed a doe down there. Two coyotes. I did go down. I was about to shoot at them. By the time I ran home and got it, well, by the time I got back they’d seen me and course they’re headed for the hills. What amazes me, as many of them as there is, how any fawn or anything...I don’t see how they survive. Birds, small animals, anything that nests on the ground, it just amazes me. The one thing we don’t have much of here in the bottom anymore is fox. I think this is true when the coyote becomes predominant, the fox leaves. So there is a few, but not many. Maybe the fox are worse for birds. They say fox and skunk are worse on birds and small animals than the coyote. But I know in the summer months, you watch them hunting and what not. They’re great mousers. Those gophers, I’m sure, is one of their mainstays. And from having them in captivity and what not, I’m sure that that fur is a necessary thing to their digestive system. Because I’ve noticed that they don’t have that fur or an old piece of deer hide to chew on or an old piece of cow hide or something and you can feed them meat. But quite soon, it seems to me, they’ll get diarrhea, and I’m sure that that fur has something to do with their digestive system.

US: You’re saying it gives them bulk?

HW: I think so, roughage or something. I think it’s vital to their system. If you ever notice cats or coyotes, their stool is always quite fur, bone particles. So I’m sure they eat the animal lock, stock, and barrel, and I’m sure that a lot of that is necessary to their diet.

DW: Herschell, when you started trapping you were in the Anaconda area?

HW: Yes.

DW: What motivated you to start trapping?

HW: Oh, I think in the family.

DW: Did you meet someone who was doing it?

HW: No, uncles and my grandparents years back trapped, and I don’t know maybe it was hereditary or something. I had a brother that done a lot of water trapping, and he was killed in a plane crash in Alaska but he’d done a lot of water trapping.

DW: What were your uncles’ names? Were they around?

Herschell Wells Interview, OH 099-025, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
HW: Bledsoe was their last name, and I have one alive yet. He now lives in northern Missouri. He's 76 or something. He still traps.

DW: Did he trap in the Anaconda area?

HW: No he didn't. His brother did. He's passed on too. He was buried down here—Dewey. Now he would have been the man well into his 80s. I think he trapped right up until his last year. He was a good predator man. So I think the trapping was just passed on down the line. I know at one year there in Anaconda I had a broken leg from a skiing escapade. I couldn't do nothing so I skinned rats. I skinned 3,900 muskrats, I don't ever want to see another muskrat. That's the way they brought them in. I think I'd be getting pretty well caught up, and I'd look and there'd be a pile of muskrats on the basement floor that high. Skinned and skinned.

DW: How much did you get paid a rat?

HW: A dime a rat.

DW: Was that good money?

HW: Well it wasn't to me. I said 3,900. They got 3,900 rats, but I didn't skin them all because I'd start getting behind and start getting tired of it and they would jump in and give me a hand. At the time, he was a student at the School of Mines, Montana Tech.

DW: Who were you skinning these for?

HW: My brother and another fellow from the Anaconda Company. He now lives in Helena. His name was Theron Delue (?). Now, he'd be 83 years old now. I don't know if he traps anymore or not. He was a chemist for the Company over there. The reason there was so many rats, the Company had left those slum ponds closed to trapping for years. Through this Deleu being superintendent of the chemical department, he got the permission to trap. So that's where all the rats come from. Those ponds hadn't been trapped for years other than kids sneaking in catching one or two of them along the edge. There was rat houses you couldn't believe, and I didn't know there was that many muskrats in the world.

DW: Herschell, were you in grade school or high school at the time?

HW: At the time I was just out of high school.

DW: Were you?

DW: Yes, just out of high school a year perhaps.
DW: How many boys in your class would you say trapped muskrats, because that’s sort of (unintelligible). It’s not always been considered a cool thing to do.

HW: I don’t think that there was that many really in the class that trapped— a few. In later years, some of them went on even for the Fish and Game system. I have a couple friends that are now retired that, well, one of them went into the fishery end of it and spent time enough until he retired. Then there was quite a number of the younger fellows around opportunity, the outlying parts that done more trapping. But the kids in town, well, I don’t think a lot of them had traps nor money to buy them with. Whereas I say, most of mine were handed down. The uncles had given them to me. My dad did trap as a young man a little, which he wasn’t a real ardent trapper, fisher, or hunter. He didn’t care for it as much as the uncles on my mother’s side. They were the trappers of the family. Out here a long time ago, (unintelligible) to that long hair fur, you were trapping more as a hobby than a livelihood because it wasn’t worth anything. I seen a time when I took cats into Pacific Hide and Fur in Butte, and they wouldn’t even buy them, just take them home and do something with them. Take them to dumps. I did take some in there one time when the state still had the bounty. I think it was two dollars and a quarter. You took the two ears and the piece of scalp between them, take them to Deer Lodge and you’d get two dollars and a quarter. It was in the late ‘40s, I think, when they done away with that. I think that year I took something like 37 cats.

US: This is bobcats?

HW: Bobcats yes. The bobcats down there.

US: Is this in Anaconda?

HW: No, I caught them out here.

US: Oh, here in Wise River?

HW: Yes, I had caught them in this area, and we used to have an old summer home down at Dewey. I spent a lot of time even from my kid days. In fact, the first time I can remember coming to the Big Hole I came with my parents as a little kid was when the Pattengail Dam up here broke, and I think that was 1927. I can remember coming over here because everything was washed out here in the bottom. I remember going up the Wise River, but how far up we went I don’t know. I just don’t remember. That is my first trip to the Big Hole that I remember coming over here. I think it was June of 1927. The only reason I know that is I read it in later years.

DW: You weren’t doing any trapping then, were you?
HW: No, not then. Shortly, not too long after that I started setting a few rat traps along that Warm Springs Creek that runs through Anaconda. I suppose in a year’s time I probably would get a dozen to 20 rats and occasionally a mink would stumble into one.

DW: Was there a season on then? Did you have to buy a license? What were the kind of regulations around it?

HW: Well, I think you were supposed to, but that was back in that Depression era and you weren’t really...I think the game warden looked over his shoulder a lot. Any kids along the creek there, he knew there wouldn’t be a license amongst them so there was no use looking. I’m not positive of this, but it seems to me at one time I bought a trapper’s license. It was like two dollars or two dollars and a half. It seems to me I did, but then for years I didn’t buy a license. As soon as I got away from the water, I just stayed with the cats, fox, coyotes—the predators—and I didn’t buy a license for years.

DW: There was none required for those was there?

HW: No, no. In the—

DW: Go ahead.

HW: In the more recent years, I’ve bought a license because I have trapped the water a little. Like I say when I get bored of being cabin fever then I go trap the water a little bit.

DW: What was the status of the beaver trapping in those days? There was quite a bit of regulation around it and quite a bit of illegal traffic and so on.

HW: Right, yes, right, right. A lot of red tape. The trapping—you were on a quota system. I forget exactly how it worked, but it seems to me at one time maybe if you get 12, something around that order. I’m not positive of it. Then I think on private land, if you were cleaning them out for somebody, they could get a permit or something and you could trap for them or something to this. Then they had to be tagged by a warden. It seems to me it costs 50 cents to get them, to get them tagged per pelt. There was a lot of regulation. Then I think what deregulated the thing in the more recent years—that is in our area—is for years the bottom fell out of pelts. So nobody bothered them and they were left and they spread like wildfire. Boy, around here there’s places that I can remember as a kid that now you can’t walk through. They’ve flooded it out and what not.

Anyway, here a couple years ago the pelt went up some, and I think what happened everybody dived in and trapped a certain amount of beaver—a good number of beaver. So consequently by spring, the bottom fell out of the market again, and it’s still in a poor state in comparison to what the pelts once were. Another thing that I can never understand is like marten. I can remember as a kid a marten, you was talking about a 40-dollar pelt in those days. You’d have to
get a 120 for him now, and he's the other way around, I think last year our marten averaged something like 21 dollars. I don't quite understand this fur market business, but now I guess the trend is long fur.

DW: I think it's the fashion, and then marten isn't in fashion.

HW: That's right. Marten and mink, otter. Like say, those otter, I just would leave them in the river. There isn't that many of them in our area, and the only ones that I catch get into those beaver sets. It's like most anything that I know of that goes into that 330 conibear, why the general rule—he's had it.

US: It's a one-way trip.

HW: Yes, right.

DW: Why would you just as soon keep them in the river or leave them in the river?

HW: I like to see them around—to have them—and they're not as valuable. They don't bring that good of a price. It seems to me those that we had...What'd they bring? Thirty-five dollars or something like that. They have beautiful fur, but—

DW: It's not in style now either. That's what it amounts to.

HW: Like the wolverine, he's another varmint you're going to get now and again, especially in cat sets. That is for lynx, you know, where you're trapping hide. You're going to get a wolverine that pays you a visit, or if you're using any ground cubby sets for marten, the wolverine will look them up too. When you're setting like that, as a rule, you use a little bigger trap, or I do because like for marten—you don't have to cover her trap—but I generally always cover anything on the ground because you just have to have a fox visit, wolverine, or bobcat, lynx. So you might as well use a little bigger trap. It'll catch the marten anyway. I think we have more wolverine all the time. I see more signs up all the time. Like I say, I don't go out of my way to try to catch them.

DW: How do you feel about the “mystique” around the wolverine? Because you've heard people go on about—

HW: I think a lot of it's “talk.” I think it is. Far as I can see, he's a nice little varmint to have out there. I like to see one now and then. He isn't just valuable. I've heard all the stuff about, oh how destructive and what not he is. Well he isn't any different than any other animal, if he knows there's a trap there and he goes in well he may tear down the cubby to go around it rather than walk right into it. If he can come in the back door, why, he'll do it. Oh yes, no doubt, if he's in that trap, gonna reach down there and pet him, he'd try to take your arm off but so would most any other animals.
US: Do people down here use 330s on the wolverines sometimes?

HW: I have set some. I have never had one get in them.

US: Is that right?

HW: Yes, but I have set a few 330s for cats, and I never caught a cat in one either.

US: You haven’t?

HW: No. I think it was just because they didn’t visit the set. I think they’d go right in it. I made up some, oh I don’t know what you’d call it, cubbies, I guess, out of snow fence. Just a Quonset-type shaped thing, yea high, set along a log covered by a bunch of brush and the 330 fits in there real well with those slots. They just slide right in there, and on the backside you can wire that spring on each side in there if you want, because the pressure is going to go back anyways so they work real well to make a cubby with. I’ve caught skunks, porcupines, everything in the world but a cat goes in them. Had a marten in one. He got in there fussing around, and he was alive yet.

US: In a 330?

HW: Yes.

US: Get his tail?

HW: No, around the middle of him.

US: Oh, where that little bend is? In the jaws?

HW: Well, the jaws are yea wide really, and he was in there alive yet. I looked and I couldn’t believe it. And I had one skunk in there alive around the bend. I’m not sure how he arranged it, but I know he arranged to make a good smell. No, I suppose that 330 is probably the greatest innovation, or that is the Conibear itself, that’s been made traps for years and years. As far as I’m concerned, the only thing for beaver...Now occasionally you’ll get one that if he’s been around the thing and tripped it with a stick or something once in a while he gets a little shy of the thing. Then you might have to use a leg hold, but all in all I don’t think that a Conibear can be beat for the water. It works real well on mink too. It’s a good trap. The smaller Conibear not the big ones. Oh yes, I’ve even caught a fish in it.

US: In a Conibear, really?

Herschell Wells Interview, OH 099-025, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
HW: Yes, yes. Caught a fish in one one day. I see it was tripped, and I pulled it out. I just knew I had a beaver, and I had a damn rainbow in there about that long. A nice fish. He must’ve swam through there and tripped it is all I can see, but he was dead.

DW: Herschell, when you were trapping these muskrats as a kid, can you recall selling them? Can you recall one day when you decided to sell, where you went and who you saw and how you got rid of them?

HW: I sold them to a local man in Anaconda. A man that trapped. He was a good trapper, and he bought the furs from most all the kids around. IT seems to me that if I got some 75 cents in that area that I thought I was doing quite well with the rats in those days. I think in later years they got up around a dollar and a quarter.

DW: Do you remember his name?

HW: His first name was Lyle, and I can’t think of his other name to save my neck.

DW: Did your uncle sell to him?

HW: No, I think he sold to Beckman’s, and we used to ship some fur to F.C. Taylor in St. Louis and I think they’re still in business. Goldberg’s—he sold some to them. There was a number of local buyers, and right now I really can’t think of their names. Pacific Hide and Fur, they bought furs for years out of Butte. Course Beckman’s had a place there that bought fur. That Bill Judd’s Sporting Goods Store in Butte—Bill bought furs at one time.

DW: Sounds like there were quite a few in the business.

HW: Yes, outfits. Yes, there was.

DW: So would you shop around or did you pretty much just go to the same person since you—

HW: Well, I found them quite competitive. You know last year on that batch of coyotes, between two buyers and they neither knew one another’s figures. They had no way. It was 23 dollars difference between two buyers on that many coyotes. Now I had sold a few coyotes to these out-of-state hunters that wanted them for wall tapestries and what not, and to them I just flat 100 dollars a pelt. Course, the take the best of them. I think I sold, what about, 41 there that one batch, and they was only 23 dollars difference in two buyers.

US: That’s remarkable, isn’t it?

HW: Yes, I thought it was, but what amazed me was watching them grade them. One guy’d go through and he’d lay this pile, this pile, this pile. But the next man that graded them, he
reshuffled them all together different. The ones that was maybe the top of the line for this fellow weren’t necessarily the top of the line for the next buyer. They had them sorted—

US: Is that right?

HW: Yes, and I thought, boy, I don’t know how this works, but yet and then they come up with a figure that close.

US: I’ve watched them grade them, and I can’t figure out...I think I understand what’s happening and then he’ll just blow my mind with something.

HW: [laughs] Yes, yes. Course those real bad ones, you can tell those real easy. Or real small, pups or something. You can see why they don’t bring anything, but those larger ones all brushed up, look nice, and everything. This year I did notice something on a coyote, and I had one buyer remark. I had any number of the poorer-color coyote.

US: Red?

HW: Yes, that red. Around their manes and what not, that reddish color. It was hard to believe that they even came from this area, but they did. Actually a little poorer quality fur. Then I had a few real pale, really beautiful pelts. They were outstanding. You’d know them right off the bat—real light. Their bellies were snow white, haired out good, their backs were haired out good with maybe a strip of the black tips on them. Real nice coyotes, but well they’re not all going to be top of the line you know that. I had a few, they’d get muddy and then you got to wash them and dry them and all that—

DW: Herschell, speaking of the fur handling and the grading and therefore the fur handling, what is your philosophy on that?

HW: I think the better care you take of them, I think any buyer notices it right off the bat. In fact, I’ve had them comment. Now, I’m not the finest fur handler. I never seem to have time for it. But Frankie and his wife, they like to fiddle with them so they’ve come down a lot of times and brush them, comb them, get them all groomed up until they do. It definitely makes a difference if you hang an old coyote up there and his fur, some’s going this way and some’s going the other way. You take and get one of those little combs with wire bristles, and you comb him all down and slick him up and shake him out good and he’s a different looking pelt. I’ve always said I was going to, which I never did. I was going to get an old clothes dryer or something like that to throw them in to tumble them. I think even then they become so much more pliable, just a nicer looking fur.

DW: Would you mind describing how you go about skinning and stretching a coyote?
HW: Well, I just start right below the feet, cut around, and then down their back legs to the vent. Then start peeling down until you get down in the tail area. Then I strip the tail out, and I use the knife as little as possible but at times if that tissue, membrane starts hanging up you’ve got to use a knife some. Me I’m not heavy enough, I use my knee, but I don’t have enough wait a lot of times to pull some of those old dogs. Some of them are reluctant to part with their hide. [laughs]. So you got to use a knife more, and like I say, I’m not the greatest skinner. It takes me about 25 to 30 minutes to peel one that I’ve...other people tell me, well that’s too long. Maybe it is, but it takes me that long. Then after I get them peeled out...the front legs. I see some people split them. I don’t. I pull them on through and go right up below their feet. My theory always was on those back legs, skin them down pretty close to the paw.

[End of Side A]
[Side B]

DW: You don’t what?

HW: Skin them up in the hills. I generally always bring them home.

DW: We were talking about skinning around that front leg. Would you say that one more time in case we missed it at the end of the tape?

HW: I skin down to it, right then you’d seem like you’re always in a jam when you get there. Up around the throat, it seems like it’s back in there. If you’re going to have a problem nicking the hide or cutting it, it generally takes place in that area, but if you can pull that leg down—

DW: Herschell, we were talking about getting that hide over the front legs and how that’s just about the easiest place to make a mistake so—

HW: As I say, I don’t split the front legs. I’ve seen some skinners that split the front leg, down to about the socket. Now I don’t, I leave it round and strip it over the foot, like you say use a plier handle, your sharpening steel, trap stake, anything—whatever’s handy to help pull that. A husky man, I know, it’s much easier because I’ve seen bigger guys run his thumb—once you get peeled around—run his thumb through and then grab the leg and pull up. Well, I don’t seem to have enough horse power. Once in a while, you get one that skins easy, but some of them old dogs, well some of them old females too are the same way, they just don’t want to let go of that hide. The younger animals seem to peel much easier.

DW: Where you’re using this trap stake or whatever is sort of in what you call the armpit?

HW: Right, through the armpit right.

DW: Okay, so you insert it there and work it down toward the front foot.

HW: Yes, just something to hold it down or to pull down on. I think the person that has enough strength, if you can hold it down and pull up on that leg, for some reason it seems to pull out better, because I think what you’re doing when you’re pulling down there is you’re pulling on the neck plus the legs—you’re pulling on all of it at once. Where the other way you’re just pulling one leg at a time up. Like I say, I don’t seem to have enough horse power to do it, but I’ve seen fellows that do it and it’s real good, I think.

DW: For someone who’s having trouble visualizing this, we probably ought to add that this animal is hanging upside down. And so we’re working the hide over the front end now, and we’re about at the neck so when you get to the neck now, can you pull that or do you—
HW: Yes. Once you pull those legs free—those front legs—and pull them on through, then as a rule you’ll strip right up to his ears.

US: Now do you turn that skin under your knee and use your knee and pull down with your knee?

HW: I do. I do, yes. It’s the only way I seem to have enough weight and power to pull it.

US: Then you take that right to the base of the ears?

HW: Yes, it’ll peel right to the ears until the ears are real definite, where you cut. Then generally, another little pull will take it to the eye sockets. Cut around those. Now, some people don’t skin the lower jaw. They cut it off. I generally do, I think it’s just habit. I don’t think it is necessary. I think I’ve just done it for years that way and didn’t get away from it. I’ve seen some hides where they do cut the jaw off, stretched, and look real nice.

DW: When you get that hide off now, what’s the very next thing you do besides rest?

HW: I put it on a board.

DW: Do you comb it? Do you do any sort of grooming at that point?

HW: No, it’s inside out then. It’s inside out. It’s hide side out. Leave it there until it becomes quite dry. If there’s any fleshing to do for that once it’s on the board, then I do what little bit of fleshing. Fat, portions of tissue that pulled with the hide—trim it off. As a rule, there’s not too much fleshing on them, but occasionally, and perhaps you’ve ran into this, you get a coyote that must’ve been over in my neighbor’s sheep because they’re so fat. Did you ever notice that?

US: Yes.

HW: Real fat buggers. The most of them that I get aren’t that fat, but every now one of them, my god, he must’ve eaten high on the hog because just rolling in fat.

DW: Do you have a fleshing beam? What sort of equipment do you use?

HW: I don’t use a fleshing beam. I do it right on the board.

US: Do you really? What kind of a tool do you use right on the board?

HW: Oh, I’ve got scrappers, and I use knives—whatever the situation is. I have one tool that I use quite a lot. It’s an old dull butcher knife, and I like that real well. I prefer it over the regular fleshing scrappers myself. You got to be a little careful, you know. You can’t...At the angle you
holding it at cause you could cut a hole, but I think you just get used to it and it works real well. In fact, if it gets too dull, I touch it up a little—not razor sharp—and it works real well for fleshing. Then—

DW: Let me, before we go, let me ask you before we go ahead on the care of it, do you make your own stretcher boards?

HW: Yes.

DW: What sort of lumber and how do you do that?

HW: I have them made out of various types of lumber. It’s most all of it three-quarter-inch stock. Some I’ve experimented different ways on the nose of them. Some I have leather over the end. Some I have (unintelligible) small strap hinge. Then I made one last year. I used two little plates. I used steel on this one, but if I make any more this way, I’m going to use aluminum. They’re riveted on one side and the one pivot in the other side. It works real good, and it don’t want to let the board twist by using those little plates. You know, the nose of the boards many times, well, say it was this way: they want to do this [gestures] somewhat when you pull quite tight if it’s leather or anything. Well, with this strap on there, this little plate, it can’t twist. It holds it quite rigid. Now that particular board—well, it was an experiment—I think it was made out of five-eighths plywood. It’s a rosin found, marine-grade plywood—sign material I think it was. It made a pretty nice board. I know I was talking to the snare man—

US: Gregerson.

HW: Gregerson over there. He had a board there I was looking at. I was telling him about it. He was real interested in how it worked, and I thought, maybe this year if I got room...I don’t know. It seems like for somebody going someplace for three days we wind up with an awful carload of junk items.

DW: Is this plate you’re talking about on the nose?

HW: Yes. It’s up on the nose area, and all it amounts to is a hinge mechanism. That way the whole tip of your board then is free for any tacks or anything you want to put in it. There’s no leather, there’s no hinge, there’s no nothing—back yea far—so that area is...I’ve tried those wire stretchers and I never did care for them, but on small animals I’ve done some wire. Coyotes and cats.

DW: What determines the shape of your board, how long it’s going to be and how pointy it’s going to be? Do you kind of eye ball this sort of thing, or is this something you learned from someone?
HW: Yes, I think it’s...I don’t imagine if you stood any of mine up there’s any two of them exactly the same but they’re close. I generally start with a pencil and a rough sketch on the board, or I throw down one of the other boards and scribe a line around it and saw it out from there then round the edges off. I’ve seen one that took my eye, and my old friend Pat Ballon (?) had them. They’re homemade. He rounded all the edges, except right up in the nose and he left them square. You’d be surprised how nice those heads looked. Where that square board was there, but only back about yea far.

US: Is that right? About six inches?

HW: No, less than that. Then, by the time it got back to the ear section, he had rounded it. The pelts look nice, just that square up there added something to it. I don’t know what, but it really made it look nice. I didn’t fix any that way, but someday when I got to sit down and make some more boards I’m going to fix a few of them.

DW: Well, I sort of interrupted you a minute ago. You were getting ready to talk about after that hide was dried to a certain extent. That’s about where we were on taking care of the hide in general.

HW: When it gets to the point it’s quite dry, but not completely dry, you should turn it then. Because if you let it get too dry...Maybe you’ve done this. I have many a time, and they’re buggers. You got to soak them or something to turn them. So if you wait...I find that depending on the weather, someplace between 12 and 24 hours, they’re generally ready to turn. If you don’t let them get too dry, they’re quite pliable yet.

DW: When that fur’s ready to come off the board, Herschell, the hair side is out. You’ve turned it, the hair side’s been on the board for however long it takes—three days, a week, whatever—and you’re ready to take it off the board, how do you handle it then?

HW: Your board, you release the tension on it, pull any pins or nails out that you had in it. Take it off. What’d I say? I don’t have the facilities. I generally hang them up, shake them out good. I try to comb them a little to get any dirt, debris. If there’s any blood spots, damp cloth and brush so that they look presentable.

DW: Then keep them hanging until you sell them?

HW: Right. I hang them by the nose. I generally put up rods and thread them through one of the eye sockets on a rod. I think that if the person has a tumbler really adds to the looks and price of their pelts. I think if a person had one, it’d be worth his while. The man over at Lewistown, Schwick (?)?

US: Swick (?).
HW: He deals in them, and he has a tumbler. Roman down here at Opportunity has a tumbler. Those hides instead of being kind of stiff, like they are when they come off the board, well they tumble them. They’re real pliable, real soft. Apparently, it must break down some tissue in the hide or something, because they’re real pliable, real nice. You can put a compound in with them—I don’t know offhand what it is—it actually makes a sheen.

US: That corncob grit, isn’t it?

HW: Yes, there’s corncob and there’s...I’ve been told other things and I can’t think of what right offhand, but it really makes them look nice. Like I say, I think a person’s so set up I think it’s worth their while to do it. If he wasn’t so far over there, I would like to had him check my furs this year, in Lewistown yes. Because he said, last year he told me he’d tumble them. You can set a bottom figure, the least that you pick for the furs, and he said if they don’t bring that, why he’d return them at one percent or something. So it was real reasonable, little or nothing really. He’s too far over there for me. If I had a truckload or something, that’d be something different. It’d pay to get out and get that far from home.

DW: You’re talking about selling them with the Rocky Mountain Fur Exchange?

HW: Yes, is that what he calls it?

DW: Yes. Right, he had a sale in Denver last year, and he was scheduled to have one in Missoula but that one was called off because not enough fur was consigned for one thing. I don’t know where the sales will be this year, but you know all the MJ (?) members will hear about it, that’s for sure.

Herschell, another thing that I’d like to ask you about today is how you managed to fit all this trapping in with your work, or do you fit your work in with your trapping? (laughs) Start me back in the ‘40s or whenever it was you were, I would say, out of school and employed. How did you swing it?

HW: Well, I was like your husband. It was an after work thing generally until midnight. Now here, like now, see as a rule I’m going to try to do it a little different this year, I hope. But see, I don’t get out of here until one o’clock in the afternoon. Then it starts getting dark early so I’ve got, what, about four hours as a general rule. Occasionally, I don’t get out of here by then, so it’s a hurried up affair. Of course then after I get home, I sometimes wind up skinning late because you know how that goes or seems to go with me. It seems like I’ll have a dry run and a dry run, and then if you catch something, well, you’re gonna catch more than one for the trip and I got it broke down. So I don’t get very far from here because I haven’t had the time. I know right here in this area, I would imagine—course there’s other areas probably just as bad—is some of the toughest coyote trapping in the country for one reason: you’ve got Butte, Anaconda, Dillon, all the locals. So many of them are not really first in the thing. So all they’re doing is educating them. I mean—

Herschell Wells Interview, OH 099-025, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
DW: Better explain it. I know what you mean, but what happens you’re saying is trappers come in here from other areas?

HW: Right, just would-be trappers, or perhaps learning. I mean everybody has to learn. But in some...Well a typical example. A fellow come in here yesterday, and he said, “I got 160 acres up here,” he said, “I decided I want to trap coyotes this fall.” He says, “How many traps do you think I ought to get?”

“Well,” I says, “as long as you’re buying them you might as well buy a dozen.”

“Yes,” he said, “I decided I’m going to catch some of them buggers.” So I thought, well—

US: There’s another person educating them, as he learns.

HW: Right, right. Everybody has to learn, but I know this fellow and if he sets that dozen traps it’ll amaze me. But if he does, I’m not going to say that he won’t catch one because as sure as you did, he would. I’m quite sure there will be an educated lot by the time he leaves them.

DW: How directly does that effect your trapping?

HW: It means you got to work this much harder and be this much more careful and what not to get them in there. I went up to Wisdom last year for Joe and I set, because he’s not a predator trapper. He’s always—

US: He said you were coming up to help him.

HW: Yes, so I went up, and I think we set eight traps—coyote traps—that day. The first time through I think he caught five coyotes.

US: You’re a good teacher.

HW: But I told him, I said, “Them are dumbers!” They are, they’re dumbers! There isn’t anybody heckling them. He’s on that Spokane ranch belongs to Rutledges. There’s a jillion acres in there that’s locked. You could run around for a week in there, and there’s nobody in there that bothers the darn things. So like I told him, “They’re dumbers. There isn’t anybody been picking at them.” Well, he set a trap and he said one came, but he didn’t get in it. He done everything, and I think he dug it up and what not. Well, that’s part of learning. We did set a couple of fox traps in a hurry that evening, and we didn’t do any good. Joe said they came all right, but we didn’t really have what scent and what not we needed. Anyway, I would like to trap that country up there, for the simple reason that as I say, they’re dumbers. You get a little farther away from Butte and Anaconda, and everybody has to learn. All of us started some place.
DW: What I hear you saying then is you only have so much time each day, and because there are a lot of people around here trying their luck at trapping, you have to really fuss over your sets to outwit the coyote? Am I hearing that right?

HW: Yes, so to speak. Yes, you better do a good job, and you better take real good care of your equipment, because if you don’t they’re going to pick you to death. You know their little traits. They going to do everything in the world to aggravate you.

DW: Well, give us an example.

HW: Dirty trap or handling your trap say with scent on your hands. I don’t think that he’s necessarily digging out the trap, he’s digging out the odor of the scent that’s on it. Naturally if he ever exposes one part of it, he don’t have anything to do with it. Yes, you can take a sprung trap that’s laying there on top of the ground. I’ve had them come along and lift their leg on it! He can see it though, he ain’t afraid of it. It’s out there in plain sight, and I’ve had them even lift their leg and give it a shot.

I think the name of the game, as far as I’m concerned with coyotes and fox, is cleanliness. I think that’s it. I know so many say to use gloves. Well, I think the glove idea I think is fine because for this reason, where you’re around your vehicle and everything you’re handling everything in the world and perhaps your hands are dirty. If your hands were clean, I don’t think it’s necessary to wear gloves, if you knew this that your hands were clean. For this reason, you go there and kneel down and walk around there, I’m sure that coyote knows you were there. Another thing I always say, which maybe I’m wrong, if you’re running line for dogs alone...if somebody goes with you or somebody’s with me, I’d rather they stay in the vehicle—not get out and stomp around there. I always say this and maybe I’m wrong, they’re used to me. They know my odor. I don’t think they get to the point where they’re not as concerned over you as you bring a stranger in, well there’s another odor that he wonders about. I know I’ve set traps bare handed, many of them, and had as good of results as I did with the gloves if my hands were what I felt clean. Then generally I’ll take like a sage brush and kind of milk it you know, or in the timber—pine bow.

DW: Rub your hands over it.

HW: Right. I think if your hands are sweaty, is bad. Then around a vehicle, no doubt, handling the steering wheel, gear shift, so on—god knows what’s got on it. But I think one of the worst things to get on a trap is scent. I think they’ll come near digging that bugger out of the ground. A dirty trap that’s contaminated, I think they just smell it. I think it’s just nature that they dig. Of course occasionally, you’ll get one of them old buggers that’ll follow you right down the line. I had one there last fall, he drove me crazy, or she, whichever it was. It was about four traps...I guess it was more than that. It was half a dozen traps in three miles, and I think that he was sitting down there waiting for me to drive up the gulch to put all them traps back in the ground.
and I think the minute I left, he come over and started digging them out. I never did catch the bugger.

DW: Was that what you mean by following? He was going up to each set?

HW: I’m sure it was the same one just walking up through the country digging them up. This would happen once a week maybe, just plum aggravating. I tried everything I could think of, and I did get one. Whether I got the one that was doing that for sure or not...I, in fact, set a trap there one day and then left the other one a little bit exposed, just like he dug it. I didn’t fiddle with it and I caught that bugger, but whether that was the one that was aggravating me or not, I don’t know. It was getting the time of year that I started to pull the traps shortly after that, they were freezing and giving me too much trouble.

The way I always figure with them buggers, if you can get away from them, if they’ll just go away...because he isn’t worth any more than the dumb one. But if you get that one aggravating you, he can ruin it for the dumb ones and all because he’s uncovered everything. Those that are really aggravating is when they dig it out and set the trap out of the hole, not even sprung. Then maybe come and dig themselves a hole about yea deep. I had a fox do that to me here a couple years ago, and he pretty near drove me nuts. I think it got to be a hobby just between he and I down here in this Jerry creek. I’d go set the trap, he’d uncover it and set it up on the thing. I think he was, like I say, hiding out there in the brush waiting for me to finish so he could get it out of there. Or else he would dust it off, every piece of it—the jaws, the pan, the spring. He must have sat there with one of them little whisk brooms or something because he’d just dust it off perfect. So I got to thinking one day, I thought, you bugger. I had tried everything. Put in multiple traps this side, and it didn’t make any difference, he knew they were there. I just couldn’t do any good with him. So one day I went down there, and I dug a hole about yea big and put a couple little sticks about the size of that pencil there. I turned the trap upside down and just set it on a real hair trigger, and I got mister fox the first night. He’d run his foot under there to lift that bugger out and, zappo I got him.

US: Did you torture him or anything, Hersh?

HW: I threatened to. I threatened to. I should’ve. I should’ve skinned him alive.

DW: Oh, what a story!

US: Did you balance the trap on the sticks so that the jaws wouldn’t throw the trap in the air when they went up?

HW: Well, it had to somewhat lift I’m sure.

US: But not entirely?
HW: Yes, enough that he got in it, and I set it on a real hair trigger. So I’m sure that when he got under there, which he’d been doing this for so long that no doubt once he got a little hole dug, he just run his foot under there and give it a push. That bugger drove me nuts for I don’t know how long.

US: I’ve heard of that, but I’ve never talked to anybody that set a trap upside down and caught one.

HW: That’s the only one that I’ve ever set upside down and caught anything. I’ve tried it a couple other times, but I never had any luck. That one time I did.

US: You know if a psychologist or psychiatrist knew about that, they might run you into Warm Springs or something, watching you set one upside down.

HW: I think with these animals, as time goes along and you study them and you learn a few of their little traits and this and that, I think you got to think somewhat like they think to get them in there. If you see some little habit, some little thing that they’re doing, some little spot they’re visiting or something, why, you got to fall right in line with him and accommodate him. Those that dig and pick...Once in a while it just seems to me you just run in to one that just seems impossible. I have tried various things, like after that scent is rendered out and what not and you end up with a bunch of bones and you got stuff, well, that’s stinky, dig a hole—a pretty good sized hole—put it in there and cover it with, say like, with nothing solid (unintelligible) from under a tree, pine needles. Then maybe use a couple logs, say yea big, that’s a drag on either side of the hole and then put a trap on either other side. So if you make a catch he’ll drag it away a little ways and not ruin the set, because sometimes that’ll work quite good. Especially after the weather gets cold and if you’re in some place where there’s some of them big old fir trees or spruce that’s quite protected, go under them and try that and it will sometimes work well.

I know one year I had traps and I’m sure they were dirty, and they just drove me crazy digging those traps out. I think it was me, not the animal. Those traps were just, they were contaminated. They were dirty. Another year, I made scent and I think I used too much additives, too many additives, and they rolled. I’d get those long hairs off their back.

US: In the trap?

HW: Yes.

US: They’d roll in the traps?

HW: They’d roll them.

DW: Why is that? It smells so good they want it on them or something?
HW: Yes, something I think, like your dog goes out and finds something to roll in. I think this is just natural for them too. They go out and roll in that, and I think have too much of the additive in the scent. The worst were flat set. Boy, if you had a flat set, they just had a ball rolling. I don’t know how many I had rolled up, get that long hair off their back where he rolled. Any of that, anything you do, I think you make the mistake and teach him. From there on, once he gets his bachelor’s degree, it doesn’t take him long to get his doctorate, I’ll tell you.

DW: Isn’t that something.

HW: He can become tough.

DW: Herschell, has your trapping every supplemented over half of your income, do you think, over the years?

HW: No.

[End of Interview]