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This is Sandra Carroll and I'm interviewing William Bolen. July 21, 1984. He jumped a season in 1940 at Seeley Lake. OH #133-5

SC Besides 1940 did you work for the Forest Service?

WB I worked there several years.

SC Where did you work?

WB Directly for the district in the Kootenai National Forest.

SC Were you the regular Forest Service?

WB Yeah, I was the district smoke chaser for several years and then I got to be an assistant ranger.

SC And then they asked you if you wanted to be a smokejumper?

WB Well they did in a way, you see, I was working way up on Big Creek and the phone wasn't working and they was asking for volunteers. They were going to pick one from each district, see there's eight districts on the Kootenai Forest and I never had any idea I'd be picked for the one to go. The guy that, he couldn't get a hold of me on the phone so he turned my name in. And that weekend he said you're probably mad at me, I turned you in for smokejumping. Well I hadn't given it any thought and I didn't think they'd pick me... so... then the next week he says "You better get your stuff ready, you've been picked", my heart went up and down [laughs]. I thought heck I'll go down and try it, that's what I did. But how do you find out whether there's any of these old guys around here. See there was just seven of us that first year. Well Cooley's one of them. He's the only one that's stuck with it all the way through.

SC Earl Cooley?

WB Yeah, Earl Cooley. Yeah he was one of the original ones. And there was one from the Flathead and Rufus Robinson and I forget where he's from. There's Jim Waite, there's Dick Lynch from Kalispell, and there was an Alexander Hamilton but he, he didn't make it on account of his heart. We stuck around there for several days, we even was out on the, sitting out on the porch and they thought it was too conspicuous [laughs] that the Federal Building was over there so they took us up in the conference room over there so we wouldn't be so conspicuous to the rest of the public.

SC What did you do, why were you all gathered there?

WB Oh we just sat around and shoot the breeze, nothing to do, it wasn't quite ready, see and then we... That was a day or two and then when... where the depot was over there one of them got a pickup and a truck and stuff, and bunch of stuff and we took off for Seeley Lake. Then we built a temporary camp there at the
Ranger Station at Seeley Lake. And then I made this first jump, you know when you're coming through the air it ain't like having your feet anchored on the ground there. I pulled the rip cord but didn't pull it hard enough see, and I jumped or fell... must have been the maximum number of feet because I was going the full speed see, and when I pulled that thing out, why it liked to have pulled me in two. And then when I got down on the ground they was all scared, you know, they could see me falling. And when you're up there you don't know you're falling. It feels like the plane went off and left you and the ground below just becomes a blur. Then the second jump we made would be that, you know where Blanchard Flats is? That's where we jumped. We'd sent a whole bunch of these, see the Army was just starting for their jumper training at Fort Benning see, and there was two airplane loads of these officers from out there. So the wind was a blowing that day twenty-five, thirty miles an hour see, and we shouldn't have been jumping in that. But they was there to show where they'd gone so we jumped in the wind. When we'd come in you'd land hard you know, and just hard enough that I broke the emergency. The emergency [chute] sits right on front of you [laughs] and drug me about seventy-five feet. My face was skinned and cut and... and to stop a shoot you got to get under the, get a hold of the lines and spill them all. I didn't do that and the wind hit, I just about got on my feet and here another gust of wind took me about that much farther. That's why, it's rough on the body, you got to be tough [laughs]. Then the third jump I made was on the the landing strip right there at Seeley Lake. And that's another thing, when you're coming down you can't gauge, well I suppose you could, it takes experience, gauge how far you are from the ground, you know. Well this Seeley Lake Ranger Station or the landing strip there is fenced for cows see, and it's got this stick and wire fence around it and I could feel myself landing right on one of them old posts there. And there I was up in the air about a hundred feet yet, and that... from then on why I decided if I want to go to a fire... oh another thing that you do when you're on a, you jump like that. When you first hit the ground there for about a half-hour or so you just feel like a million dollars. And then the shock sets in and then you just feel like you've done two day's work in one. And that's what's, one of the reasons why I quit. Because I figured if I was going to go a fire, what good's going to a fire if you're going to be all played out by the time you get on the ground and get organized. So that's about the size of what I know about it.

SC OK, but you just did those three jumps and you didn't do any fire jumps?

WB No, maybe the next one would have been.

SC OK, but you were one of first that they chose to...

WB I was one of the first seven.

SC What did you do before the jumps? Did you do any kind of organization, did you guys talk about...
WB Oh, you mean at the camp?

SC Yeah.

WB Oh yeah, they set up big long, they put two, well we had our bunk tents. And then they put up two tents end to end and then they built a big table up the middle so they could pack the chutes. *We'd go out and jump early you know, the air is the smoothest when you first get up. As the heat comes on, why the air gets rougher all the time, see. Then in the afternoon you could go down to the bar there in Seeley Lake [laughs] or sleep.

SC When they called you and these other seven men to go to start this, did you all get together and talk about what you were going to do? Did they give you training for this?

WB No, no training at all they just, see this Chet Derry he was the head instructor, he was an old stump jumper. He jumped over two hundred jumps before he ever come down here. There was one, one of those Army guys over there. There was two jumpers, there was Chet Derry and Glenn Smith, they was two of the instructors, they was putting on a show for the Army guys [laughs]. They went up there and they'd jump just as close as they could and I could hear them talking up there and he'd say "Goddammit Chet, get your feet out of my chute!"[laughs]. They was just that close, you know they come out of the airplane.

SC Did you know beforehand that they were going to choose people to be jumpers?

WB Well yeah, they was, they said they was going to, well what they done they turned in one guys name from each district. There was eight districts and that's the reason why I figured out of the eight guys I wouldn't be the one that was picked to go down. Then I could have went the next year but somehow they messed up, I don't know, they couldn't get a hold of me I guess again that year. I wouldn't have been trying it the second year because I at least had some idea of what it was like, before you didn't. You was just guinea pigs, they was experimenting with you.

SC What did they tell you? When they brought you they told you that you that you were picked and then what happened? Did they take you somewhere and start talking to you about what they wanted you to do or did they just start?

WB Well, Chet Derry did a lot of talking about one thing or another. But it's nothing like it is now where they push upon those, they got them by the head and let you hang in the air just like you was coming down in a chute, it's a lot different.

SC Yeah, but what did they tell you, that's what we'd like to know, what they told you back then.

WB Well now that's forty years ago you know, that's kind of hard to remember.
SC  Do you remember any of it?

WB  You mean what they told me?

SC  Yeah, or what they told you you were going to be doing, or what you all talked about, the eight guys that got picked.

WB  We knew what we was going to do, we would be putting fires out because that's the reason why we were picked. Because we were good smoke chasers, we knew how to put fires out. That's the reason why, they tried to pick somebody who knew what he was doing when he got there.

SC  OK, so you already had that, you already knew how that...

WB  I had been a smokejumper for three or four, or a smoke chaser three years before I come down there. So I had a lot of experience at putting out fires. And then I was a lookout for three years. You just kind of... well they started in working on trails and one thing or another. Then you worked your way up and I was up there as far as I could go without a college education. That's the reason why, another reason why I quit the Forest Service all together, was that if you haven't got a college degree you can't get any place. That's what Earl, he was smart there, see he was just like an ordinary guy like us without any education too. But then he went to the University and got his degree in forestry and then he could get someplace.

SC  Did you know Earl Cooley very well?

WB  Well I just, like all the rest of us, it was the first time we'd seen him. Then we come down there and was altogether and we probably did more visiting and talking over there while we was waiting to go out to Seeley Lake than...

SC  What did you talk about, did you talk about doing those jumps?

WB  No, we was just, didn't know [laughs].

SC  But you were all in the Forest Service?

WB  Yeah, we was all Forest Service employees, picked because we was supposed to be good smoke chasers.

SC  And how long was it before, when you got picked until you jumped your actual jump?

WB  Oh, the time? It wasn't very long because...I was up there working on this Big Creek, we was going to stay all week. There was a cabin on this Big Creek. And they asked for volunteers, I think it must have been along the first part of the week. They had a phone that wasn't working so they couldn't get a hold of me, so he just turned my name in. Then I, like I said the next week why he said you've been picked. I never give it any thought.
that they'd pick me out of the eight, that's getting pretty close [laughs].

SC But you were willing to try it?

WB Yeah, I didn't know any better.

SC OK and so then they took you up to Seeley Lake, you built this camp.

WB Yeah, we built this camp, and then they was supposed to take off from there. They went from there to Moose Creek, the Moose Creek Ranger Station. You know where that's at?

SC Yes.

WB But yesterday I would have liked to got a hold of some of them guys. But how you going to find them old guys? The only one you probably could find would be Cooley because he's the only one that's around, the rest of them I don't think followed it up, I never heard what become of them, the other six.

SC Did they stay with it?

WB Well I don't think so.

SC No, I mean that season, when you, after you jumped.

WB Well we all did that season, probably four or five seasons as far as that goes. But as far as staying with it, Cooley was the only one that stayed with it. Then during the war, I don't know, he stayed out of the service some way, see I put in three years in the Navy. And then when those Army guy was out there [at Blanchard Flats to watch us jump] they all took our names you know, and we done that jumping and everything why, they was there for their benefit. We thought maybe we would hear something from them but we never did hear nothing from the service.

SC Did those, the other men go on to jump that season in 1940 into any fires?

WB Oh yeah, I think so, yeah.

SC Were you still with the Forest Service then?

WB I worked five or six years longer and then I quit, out of the red tape, not being able to advance. I quit.

SC What kind of training did they, they didn't give you very much training when you first started, when they first chose you eight to go down there?

WB No we just went down there [laughs]. They didn't tell you nothing. You just get up there and find it for yourself.
SC They told you about the parachute, and who did the actual telling, gave you that information, showed you, who was it that was instructing you about the chutes?

WB That was just Frank Derry and Chet Derry and then Glenn Smith. And see Chet, and Dick Johnson was one of them a flying, he had this Travelaire. Seen both of them got killed, they was counting elk in Yellowstone Park.

SC So they didn't give you too much training?

WB They didn't give you any [laughs]. See now that's only other different thing. They take you out there and give you these certain exercises and... when you hit on the ground coming down the chute it's just like jumping off about a ten foot wall you know, you're supposed to pitch forward. I think the second jump I was going to try to stand up and I went over backwards and you take quite a beating on the head when you go backwards. You're better off to pitch and go on your hands forward. But that's just about like jumping off a ten foot wall.

SC So you just jumped like over the airstrip, you didn't jump in the forest or anything?

WB No, the two jumps there at Blanchard Flats and then the other one at Seeley Lake.

SC And how long were you up there, I mean how long of time did you spend before you...

WB Oh we must have been there a week. We must have been there a good week... because we... there was a, the chutes had to be hung up to get the grasshoppers out of them. The grasshoppers will eat holes in them, so they had to put up a big pole and then put a line on it so they could raise these up you know. The chutes are strung out you know, and they must be pert near fifty foot tall. Oh that's another thing too, that we had. We had these old Eagle parachutes that wasn't designed for smokejumping at all. They designed all this stuff since then. The second jump then that's just to, to guide yourself you reach up and get a hold of one of them guide lines you know, it'll pull you around this way. Well this one had riser straps in there so tall that I couldn't reach it. I had to take both hands to get up there. That's a lot of nonsense too, so all that stuff had to be worked out.

SC And what kind of outfits did they give you to wear?

WB Oh, you had these, they had the regular outfits. All the weight's right on the straps you know, then they've got the big collar and then a football, you've got a regular football helmet with a, they had these masks to protect his face. And then everything is made so that it'll all sheer off if you go down in the brush. They wouldn't be no, like there might be something sharp you know, catch something and stick in a ways. Everything
is made so it'll sheer off. And then on one, one side of your leg there you had a hundred foot rope if you lit on top of a tree. And they showed us how to, how to if you go down the length of your rope and then start over and then go down again you could get yourself down out of a hundred foot tree. But those chutes are pretty sensitive. They was, it showed this in this one book where they jumped in '38 at Chelan that this one guy lit in this top of this tree with a dead top and it broke out and he fell. But that chute opened up before he hit the ground and saved him. That's just how sensitive they are if they're given a chance to open up. Then you was supposed to count three when you went out of the airplane, well I was thinking about other things I guess [laughs]. Now they don't do that at all, they've got static lines, they just hook on there and you jump out and it pulls the chute open.

SC What did you think about the first time you jumped out of an airplane?

WB Well you was thinking about lots of things [laughs].

SC Do you remember?

WB No [laughs], forty years ago?

SC Do you remember what it felt like?

WB Oh yeah, that's something that you never... course it, when you get out there and your chute opens up why you, you don't know you're falling. Then you can look around, boy you get a birds eye view of the country [laughs].

SC Was it hard to take that first step out of the plane?

WB Well yeah, it ain't easy. That's what this Chet Derry said. He said, or not Chet but Frank Derry says, he says don't let them bother you, or don't let them tell you that it don't bother you, it just isn't human nature to get up there five thousand feet and bail out. That's what Dick Johnson told me, he said he didn't know whether he could do it. He done a lot of flying [inaudible]...just get over there and walk out the door and jump out. Of course that's something you got to, you got to build your confidence up. The more jumps you got I suppose the more easier, of course why if when your first starting out, why then the first one your kind of dumb. You don't know what's going on. Then the next one you realize what could go on and then after the more jumps you got I suppose. You see all this skydiving and all that stuff had all started since then.

SC What did they tell you about jumping?

WB What did they tell me?

SC Yeah, when they were showing you about this chute were they just trying to tell you everything to do? Or were they...
WB: You could see how the chutes were packed there. See they had this big long table and they had to be folded just a certain way.

SC: Did they show you how to do that?

WB: Oh yeah, all of that was done before we ever went out.

SC: And that was the only kind of training, like how to get out of a tree and how to pack your chute?

WB: Yeah, that's something that they could have, course it was just all temporary. Now they've got all these towers and one thing or another. They teach them all that stuff before they ever get up there and jump.

SC: So you didn't have the benefit of all that. They just took you up in the plane and told you to jump?

WB: No, we were just the guinea pigs, they was experimenting [laughs].

SC: So, OK, that was your first jump and the second jump was when you hurt yourself, when you fell back?

WB: Well I don't know if that was the third one or the second one, was where the wind was blowing when the Army guys was there. It was blowing about twenty five, thirty miles an hour and you're not supposed to jump when it's over fifteen miles and hour. The Army big shot was there, the show had to go on.

SC: What about the other guys?

WB: Oh then they put a circle, you were supposed to, I think each one of us put in fifty cents and the guy that came the closest to that circle was supposed to get the money. [laughs] I wasn't within four or five hundred feet of that. Well I scared the hell out of them too, when they could see me falling up there. Boy when that old shoot opens up you know it.

SC: Well was anybody seriously hurt during those first few times when they were teaching you?

WB: No, the only, they was nobody got hurt down there jumping. There's no call for it, you are just on the ground. When you start jumping in the woods, well that's different.

SC: Well you said that you did three jumps and then you decided that's not what you were going to do.

WB: It made me too nervous, it worries you too much. You've got to be the right, the right disposition and I guess I wasn't that.

SC: I thought you said you thought about going back next year and trying it again.
You went through Eureka then.
Well I didn't remember that.
Do you live here?
In Butte. I was here, I was in Missoula, I lived here for a year and a half but now I live in Butte.
You're out of school now or still going?
No I'm nursing student. I'm back in school.
Oh you're a nursing student.
Well you did, did it scare you to think about jumping out of an airplane? That they picked you to jump out of an airplane?
Well it isn't like jumping out of a fire or anything if that's what you mean.
Did you just sort of do it because you got picked by the Forest Service and you felt like it was your job?
Well yeah, I figured if they thought that much of me I'd at least go down and try it.
Did you think about it before you went down there, about what it was going to be like?
You didn't have any idea, you just have to have your imagination. I imagined what it was like, but that's, doesn't tell what the story is, when you get up in the sky and you bail out.
What did your friends think about you going up there?
Well, my dad was dead and my mother, she was pretty happy when I quit and come home [laughs]. She never said anything when I left but you could tell it was worrying her.
What about the other guys that you worked with in the Forest Service, how'd they feel about you being picked, do you know?
I never talked to them about it.
Oh. Were there other ones that were interested?
Well they were just beginning and there wasn't nobody that give it that much thought. There's been several people that I know of that went into it after.
Did you think it was a good idea?
WB Yeah, but the shock doesn't set until you land on the ground you know. It'd be pretty hard to fight a fire after you felt like somebody whacked you on top of the head [laughs].

SC But did you think it was a good idea that they would drop troops in to get to those fires?

WB Oh yeah cause putting a fire out the main thing is getting there as quick as you can before it builds up, see and get them when they're small. That's the object of fighting fires with smokejumpers. A lot of times it'll take you four or five hours or maybe sometimes take you all day to get there and by the time you get there you've got more fire than you can handle. If you can get there right away in hurry, why even one guy can handle a lot more fire.

SC Did you work with smokejumpers after that season when you were out there?

WB Did I work for them afterwards?

SC Did you work with any smokejumpers?

WB No. I never ran into them. I never saw any of them again.

SC Oh.

WB We always put ourself in there by the heat. [laughs]

SC Well so what overall do you think of your experience in those three jumps when you did that?

WB I don't know if I'd do it over again or not but it was something to know that you was one of the them picked and one of the first ones to start. You must know that somebody thinks they had a little faith in you.

SC Did you feel proud of that, did you feel like it was an honor to be chose?

WB Well I think it was, yeah.

SC Did the rest of the men with you feel that way too, did you ever talk about that?

WB Yeah, somewhat. Like I say, it was forty years ago I don't remember it all.

SC But you would have done it again if you had the chance that next year in 1941?

WB Oh yeah, I wouldn't want to miss out on that.

SC Besides Earl Cooley do you remember if any of the other men went on to do it?
WB  Huh?

SC  Besides Earl Cooley do you remember if any of those other group of men you were with went on?

WB  Yeah, Dick Lynch from Flathead and Rufus Robinson, he was from Idaho somewhere, Jim Waite and Cooley. I don't where Cooley was from.

SC  Did they go, did all of them stay on then?

WB  Huh?

SC  Did they all stay on then in 1940?

WB  Well the whole bunch did, the only guy that didn't stay on was this, his name was Hamilton. They took us out here, oh that was another thing, they took us out here, they took us out here and give us a physical examination at the Fort [Fort Missoula], see, and he didn't pass the physical.

SC  Oh that's right, you said something was wrong with his heart?

WB  Yeah, it was his heart.

SC  Did they give you a pretty extensive physical exam?

WB  Yeah, it was pretty complete, yeah. I guess, well like I say, forty years ago I can hardly remember.

SC  Did you feel like you were in pretty good health though?

WB  Oh yeah. Well I'm still in pretty good health. I'm seventy years old. I see Earl, he's two years, well we was all about the same age, see he's two years older, he's seventy two.

SC  Did they give you any other kind of testing? Did they just test you physically? Did they test you mentally at all, do you remember if they gave you any kind of...

WB  No. I guess they figured the dumber you was the better off you were [laughs]. If you was smart they probably wouldn't get you the job [laughs].

SC  Do you remember how much time passed between when you were first notified and when you had to go?

WB  Have to do what?

SC  Do you remember how much time there was, did they just tell you one day and the next day you were...

WB  Oh you mean when I was picked?

SC  Yeah.
WB Well there was a week.

SC Oh.

WB They turned in the, it must have been about the first part of the week when they asked for volunteers. Then that weekend I come in and went home, why he said "I turned your name in" and then I was out another week see, it was two weeks when I got in town. (Inaudible)

SC Do you remember, like in the Kootenai Forest where you were how many people volunteered?

WB Well there was supposed to been one.

SC No, no, that got picked, one. But did lots of people volunteer, was there a lot of interest in doing smokejumping?

WB No, like I said before it was too new see. There wasn't nobody that give it much thought.

SC Did you just think it was your duty or were you, did you think it was kind of exciting?

WB Oh it was something to do.

SC You think that, do the other men that were with you, do you think that that was part of it too, that it was just something new to try?

WB I didn't get you.

SC Do you think that the other men that you were with did it for the same reason, that it was something new?

WB Oh it was something new. Try it out.

SC So you just decided that after your third jump that at that time it was just too hard?

WB I was worrying about it too much.

SC Did you worry before?

WB Well that's it, after I made up my mind to jump, when I started putting the chute on then you haven't got that to think about. And as you get in the plane and the plane moves up, you got something else to think about, we got to accept what might happen and then it don't bother you so much.

SC Did you all worry about, did you all talk about it like the first time you were all going to go up?

WB I suppose, I don't suppose any of us would admit to having second thoughts. [laughs]
SC Did you talk about what it was like after your first jump, do you remember that?

WB I don't know if we talked about it, we just went in and laid down and slept. We got to go out before breakfast and then we worked til noon and then we take the afternoon off.

SC How'd you feel when you were coming down, did you like how it felt?

WB Oh yeah when you're coming down you don't feel like you're falling at all you know, until you finally get down there close to the ground and then you feel it moving. It's like the plane went off and left you. You don't know until you try it [laughter]. There are lots of women that are the skydivers.

SC So did you think it was a good experience to do that?

WB Oh it was an experience, there's no question about that. Especially to get into being a pioneer or something like that, being the first ones to do it, that should be a little feather in your hat.

SC For sure. So you didn't do it the next season but you would have done it?

WB I was thinking about it.

SC Oh, you were thinking about it. Is there anything else that you would like to say about you experiences?

WB No, I said more now than I thought I could say.

SC OK

TAPE IS TURNED OFF AND ON

WB Well there was smokejumpers burn up over on the...

SC Mann Gulch?

WB Huh?

SC At Mann Gulch you're talking about that fire?

WB Yeah, it wasn't the fault of the chutes that had anything to do with it. They was trapped on the ground. I think the leader made the wrong decision and they got trapped and once you're trapped, why that's it. So that's no fault of the, they couldn't blame that on the smokejumpers, the smokejumpers didn't just jump right into the fire, they burned up after they was on the ground. They got trapped. I read that article and I think there was two or three of them that did save themselves, they didn't lose all of them. But that was just an act of nature, wind changed on them and the next thing you know you're trapped . It don't take
long in a fire, shuts your air off. [pauses]
Shut your machine off now.

SC OK.

END OF THE INTERVIEW