The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Nan Nelson was a newlywed when she first saw the Swan Valley in March of 1942. Outfitted for her honeymoon, she arrived here wearing high-heeled sandals and a dress. Two days earlier, she and her boyfriend, Mel, had eloped. They left their homes in Tacoma, Washington, got hitched at a courthouse in Wallace, Idaho, then headed to the mountains of Western Montana and the Nelson family’s summer cabin near Barber Creek in the Swan Valley.

“It was a rude awakening, I’ll tell you,” she laughed.

“The road from Missoula was nothing more than a little cow path, really,” she said, shaking her head. “And there was still snow on the ground.”

Nan and Mel were young and in love, teenagers. She was 16, he was 17. Her eyes dance and you can still see the thrill of romance in her quick smile.

“We ran off and got married, and came over here,” she said with an impish grin. They hadn’t considered what their families might think.

“Well, we weren’t thinking about that, I mean we were in love. We didn’t care. We just wanted to be married,” she laughed.

“When we started out everything was nice and good and everything, and in Coeur d’Alene we couldn’t find the courthouse, so Mel says ‘I know where the courthouse is in Wallace, we’ll go to Wallace!’ So we went on over to Wallace, and we stopped off to have breakfast and he looks at me and says ‘I don’t know, maybe shouldn’t do this.’ And I says, ‘If you think that you’ve kept me out all night and you’re going to take me back home and say “Sorry folks, we didn’t get married!” you’ve got another think coming!’ So we went ahead and got married because I wasn’t about to go home not married,” she said matter-of-factly.
“I think that was the only second thought he ever had. All the time, if we ever had any problems, I kept thinking ‘We have to work it out, I can’t have someone saying ‘I knew that marriage wouldn’t last,’ so I was determined that this wasn’t going to happen. Of course I didn’t have much problem. He was a good guy to be married to,” she said.

This spunky pair’s youthful commitment endured for nearly 50 years. Mel died of cancer in 1992, just four weeks shy of the couple’s golden wedding anniversary.

“I look back sometimes. I see some of the kids at 16 and 17 and I think, ‘We must have been unusually advanced for our ages,’ because those kids would never have have been able to make it. They wouldn’t have been willing to work that hard,” she said, shaking her head almost in disbelief.

“We had been going together for about a year,” she explained.

The couple had occasionally talked about running away to get married. “The opportunity came up. It was my sister’s birthday, and we were going to go down to the theater with her and a friend. We said we’d meet them down there, but we decided it might be a good time to elope. At home, I slid my suitcase out my window, out on the porch and down into the backyard. Mel caught that, and we drove off in his little car. Then we just took off,” she grinned. “I asked my sister one time, ‘What did you think when we didn’t show up at the movies?’ She said, ‘Well, we thought you probably wanted to do something different.’”

Different indeed! After their quick stop in Wallace, the adventurous teens headed straight for the Swan Valley, and the little log cabin that Mel’s family had owned since the late 1920s. Mel’s father, Carl Nelson, worked for the Northern Pacific railroad. Mel was born in Missoula, and his family spent summers and other free time working on an old homestead that straddled Barber Creek, just east of the Swan River. Mel had spent his boyhood summers fishing the creeks, and exploring the Mission Mountains. When Mel was a young teenager, his dad was transferred to a job in Tacoma. And that’s where Nan met Mel.

“I met Mel’s sister, Junise, in junior high, and soon after met Mel,” Nan explained.

When Nan and Mel arrived in the Swan Valley in 1942, the first thing they did was call their folks from the Forest Service telephone at Strom’s Store. Nan had laryngitis so she couldn’t talk above a whisper. Mel did all the talking.

Nan Nelson Interview, OH 422-071, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
“They had a big meeting,” Nan explained, adding that the families decided that since the teens were both pretty strong-headed people, the kids would probably just run away all over again if they tried to make them return to Tacoma. The parents decided to let the mischievous pair go ahead and try to make their own way.

The Swan Valley was sparsely populated in the late 1940s, but Mel was capable and knew his way around the community. “There weren’t a lot of people here, but the people who were around were always willing to help you if you needed any help,” Nan remembered.

“In those days, there weren’t many cars coming into the valley, so everybody in the valley knew that a couple of strange people (had arrived). They all knew we had gotten married. Tuffy Anderson said one time, ‘I remember when you came over here, you were so stuck up!’ And I said, ‘I wasn’t stuck up, I was scared to death!’”

Nan was scared, but that didn’t put a damper on her outgoing personality. She loves people, and soon made friends with her closest neighbors, Glen and Clara Huston.

“When it was wash day, Clara had the washing machine. The guys would get the water for us (from the river) and we’d light up the fire, heat the water, and wash clothes,” she said. “You’d do all of your washing in the same water. By the time you got to the end of washing, the water was pretty dirty!”

Mel soon went to work at Uno Strom’s Salmon Prairie sawmill, cutting ties for the railroad. The men worked from daylight until dark, five days a week. Uno’s brother, Tauno, loaded the railroad ties onto a truck and hauled them to Bonner. “When they’d get a load they’d go down to Bonner and spend the day loading the ties into the railroad cars. They did that all by hand,” she said.

Later, Nan and Mel found out that when Strom hired Mel, he thought Mel was 18, and of legal age to do sawmill work.

“They couldn’t have hired him. Even back then, they couldn’t have hired anybody to do the kind of work he was doing if he was only 17,” Nan explained.

While Mel helped at the mill, Nan filled her days discovering the secrets of rural survival. “When you haul water and do all this other stuff, I was busy. I didn’t have any big hobbies or
anything, but I did visit with Clara. But there weren’t any other people really close,” she explained.

Water for washing clothes and bathing came from the river in a bucket. The river was several hundred yards from Nelson’s cabin. “You hooked the bucket on the wire and it went “zing” down the cable. You would fill it with water and then you would pull it back up the hill with a rope,” she said. “There was a metal hook that the handle of the bucket went on and then when it went down it went zinging on down and hit the water and then it would turn side ways and the water would come over and into the bucket. Then it would sink and you would pull it back up again.”

The river was also handy for bathing, at least once.

“We bathed at the swimming hole, and the first time we did that it was March and there was still ice on it. It was cold! So then the next time I made Mel bring the water up to the house and I heated it in a big wash tub,” she laughed.

Nan bought milk and eggs from Eva Wilhelm at the 33 Bar Ranch. Wilhelm also raised guinea hens. “They were the noisiest things you ever heard in your life,” Nan recalled.

Fresh eggs were enjoyed for breakfasts, and for baking, though Nan had some difficulty with the cakes.

She grew up in Tacoma, with the Pacific Ocean practically lapping at her door. “When you cook things at sea level it cooks a lot different than it does up here in the mountains. My first cake, a double layer cake, was about an inch and a half high. They didn’t have cake mixes in those days. You had to do it by scratch,” she said, looking discouraged. “I quit making cakes!”

Nan’s dad owned a neighborhood grocery store in Tacoma. “I was used to going next door to the grocery store to get the stuff for dinner.”

The closest store, for Nan, was a small building at the location of today’s Swan Valley Centre, where the Strom family sold a few necessities. The nearest grocery outlet was 25 miles away at Seeley Lake.

“I don’t remember that there was much there, either,” she said.

When the teens had arrived at the cabin in March, they found the cupboards nearly bare.

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Nan Nelson Interview, OH 422-071, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
“You couldn’t leave much up here because in the winter it would freeze. So there was hardly anything there. Some macaroni or something like that, but I don’t remember that there was much else,” she explained. “That was a little hard. But I did know how to cook. I cooked quite a bit for my folks when I was home. My mom was working in the grocery store then, helping my dad out. So I was the one who was in charge of most of the meals. I did know how to cook, but not when I had to plan the meals too far ahead.”

When Mel could get to Missoula, he would take a list and stock up on a few groceries. She remembers one time when he didn’t come home with the right supplies.

“We didn’t have a rig to drive at the time. Whatever rig we had was kaput. So he rode with Tauno (Strom) to town on the truck. I gave him a list of groceries for things like potatoes, beans and some kind of meat, bacon or something. So he went to town and bought himself this Model A pickup. When he came back with the groceries, he had this big five-pound bag of beans and nothing else. No brown sugar, no nothing to go with it! And I didn’t know how to cook beans just like that!” she laughed.

Thank goodness Mel’s mother, Min Nelson, showed up for the summer. She had raised a large family. She immediately took charge of the wood cook stove and the backwoods kitchen.

“We ate well the rest of the summer,” Nan laughed.

Min stayed in the valley from about the middle of June through August that year, and then returned to her winter home in Tacoma.

With a little relief from the homestead chores, Nan and Mel found time for fun that summer. After all, it was their honeymoon. The Fourth of July activities in Seeley Lake offered entertainment.

“That was something,” Nan remembered. “We went down to Seeley on the 3rd and there was a dance and a whole bunch of stuff. When we came back up here the thing that I remember about that was, we were coming around the corner there by Pete Rovero’s (north of Rainy Lake) and looked up on the hill up on the west side and here was this big elk. I bet you he had five or six points. He was a beautiful animal and the sun was just coming up and it was just really a neat thing. You just don’t see them like that anymore. It was just the big party down there at Seeley, because there wasn’t that much around here to do,” she said.
Things moved at a slower pace in the Swan Valley. Mail arrived about three times a week. “You had your mail bag and you stuck it out (by the road),” Nan said. “We never went to the post office very much, just dropped our letters off (in the mail sack) and if you didn’t have any stamps, then you just put the money in and they took care of it for you. It was very accommodating,” she said.

Telephones were few and far between. The Forest Service maintained the lines, with phones at Lion Creek, the old Condon Ranger Station, Strom’s, the Wilhelm’s, and the Gordon Ranch. “They were all hooked together, I don’t know how many party lines, but it was all the same line, so as soon as the phone rang everybody listened to see what was going on. And of course the more people that got on the line, the harder it was to hear anything!” she explained.

When Mel’s mother went back to Tacoma at the end of the summer, she warned the young couple that they should think about leaving the area soon. “She told us we shouldn’t stay here in the winter. That was right when the war was really getting up and everybody was going to the coast to work. There weren’t very many people around. All the guys would leave their wives here, and go over to Tacoma and Seattle, and work in the shipyards or wherever they could. So everything kind of died out,” she explained.

“I think we left in September. After his mom left, the work got so there wasn’t any. Everybody else was gone. We piled all our stuff, including the washing machine, and I don’t know why in the world we took the washing machine, but we did, and put it in the back of the pickup, like the “Okies” (of the 1930s). We drove across through Washington State, Spokane and everything at night. I think that we had 19 or 20 flat tires. So every time we had a flat tire Mel would get out -- they were tubes you see -- so you’d put a new patch on the tube, and pretty soon there wasn’t any place to put any more patches. It was all one big patch. It took us quite a while to get across there. It wasn’t like driving it now. But we did it at night because it was a lot cooler. I think if we had gone across in the daylight we would have had more flat tires. They were old tires, and old tubes too,” she said.

Mel had turned 18 in August. He was soon notified that he would be drafted into military service. Mel went to work in the shipyards for the winter, and the next spring he joined the Army.
“We were renting a house from my folks,” Nan explained. “That spring after we had come back, they shipped him from Fort Lewis to Louisiana . . . I went down to be where he was, but that was only during basic training which was only three months, and then they shipped him out and I was going to go wherever he was then, but they shipped him overseas,” she said. “He was gone until the end of the war.”

Mel was one of those rare young men who could build or repair just about anything. He specialized in mechanics and electrical engineering, and served in England and France in an engineering unit throughout the war. He not only fought as a soldier, but also worked at rebuilding crucial facilities. He received a bronze medal for work done on a hospital in France.

“He helped rebuild all the electrical systems, the generators, because it had all been destroyed,” she said.

Nan returned to Tacoma. “We didn’t talk about it much. It was just something you had to do. You were called and that was your job, so you went. We made the best of whatever it was.”

Nan didn’t see Mel again until just before the end of the war, when Mel received a month’s leave. The military brought some soldiers home to America, planning to redeploy them to Japan. It happened that Japan surrendered during the month when Mel was home, so he never went overseas again. Mel returned to a base in Louisiana after his leave. But he never checked in with Nan and she was worried. “I hadn’t heard from him so I finally got in touch with a chaplain . . . and they finally found him for me again,” Nan explained. Military officials told Nan that Mel had contracted hepatitis. “He had really been sick, just delirious,” she said. He survived, even though he had been so sick he didn’t remember what happened to him. “Somebody was looking out for him all the time,” she said.

Mel soon received his discharge, and he returned home to Tacoma where he hoped to go to work as an electrician. Nan remembered that the powerful Tacoma electricians’ union wouldn’t allow him to work without completing their apprentice program. Instead, Mel worked at various other mechanical jobs until he landed himself in the sawmill business, and finally, at St. Regis Paper Company, where he stayed for many years.

Mel was also a licensed pilot, and salvaged and rebuilt several planes. His hobby paired well with his love of fishing.

Nan Nelson Interview, OH 422-071, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
“He and a friend had this float plane together,” Nan recalled. “They fished up in Alaska a lot. Because they had the float plane, they could go out on the fancy lakes up there that are way back in the middle of nowhere. They’d camp on the beach,” she said. Nan didn’t participate in the fishing trips. “Those were men trips. They weren’t women trips, so all the wives stayed home,” she laughed.

As a young boy, Mel explored the Mission Mountains with his good friends and Swan Valley neighbors, Warner Lundberg, and Glen Huston. Mel even returned to the Swan Valley sometimes in the winter, when the trio ventured into remote mountain lakes where they caught trophy trout through holes in thick ice.

High mountain lakes and the South Fork of the Flathead River offered prime fishing. “I remember a picture of the Wilhelms, Babe and his family. They had more fish on those horses bringing them out of the mountains. There was a whole slug of them. There were no limits in those days,” she said.

While Mel had been overseas, Nan went to work for the telephone company in Tacoma. “I worked for them for quite awhile. It was a good job, the pay wasn’t as good as going to the shipyards, but I wasn’t quite cut out for working at the shipyard,” she laughed. Later, she also worked for Pacific Lutheran University. “It was the ‘number please’ era of telephone operators,” she laughed.

From 1945 until 1972, the Nelson family lived in Washington State where they raised three children. Every summer they returned to the Swan Valley for a few weeks to vacation and do a little fishing with their kids. The post-war years brought a steady pace of change to the Swan Valley, but it remained rural.

“The kids could go and fish, they loved to fish, and usually there was at least one other set of cousins over here that they got to play with,” Nan remembered. “The kids would all play and ride the horses around. It was just kind of a free time, you know? You didn’t have to do too much.”

The new highway from Seeley Lake to the Swan Valley was completed in 1957, although road improvements further north to Kalispell weren’t finished until the 1960s. Electricity
arrived in the late 1950s. The Nelson family even drilled a well and piped water inside their summer cabin.

“The river got kind of contaminated. They were worried about kids getting sick,” she said.

Mel and Nan planned to someday make their home permanently in the Swan Valley. They eventually bought land from Mel’s stepfather, Andy Kopra. (Mel’s dad, Carl, died and his mother, Min, married Andy in 1967.)

In the 1950s, Kopra had developed an RV park, garage, café and grocery store complex north of the Holland Lake turnoff.

When Mel and Nan purchased the property it included several cabins that had been relocated from the Wineglass Mill (on the Gordon Ranch). Most of the trailers that Andy had rented earlier to construction crews were gone.

“In the 1950s I think they had about 50 trailers, and cabins and stuff,” Nan explained. “The road workers were all working on the road and they were living here.” Before the power lines were completed, Andy would go out every night and start his generator so the men could have lights and running water in the cabins.

After Andy married Min, she cooked at the café and helped in the store.

“The store wasn’t much then,” Nan explained. “Andy wasn’t much for groceries. You’d go in there and you might find a loaf of bread, but then you might not also,” she said.

Min helped build the grocery business back up again. Summer residents who were building cabins at Lindbergh Lake were among Kopra’s clientele. “With the gas and the groceries you could do quite well, making a living,” Nan remembered.

By the early 1970s, Andy Kopra decided that he didn’t want to run the cafe and grocery store. “He wanted to sell, but he didn’t want to sell to anyone but Mel. He decided that we might just as well buy it and move back to the Swan Valley,” Nan said. In 1972 Mel and Nan ran away from Tacoma once again and moved back to the Swan, this time for good.

“We left all our kids in Tacoma (they were grown up and on their own by then, she said) and came over here,” she laughed

“Mel said, “I lived 30 years out on the coast for you, now you have to live 30 years over here for me.’ He didn’t quite make the 30 years, but I’m still here,” she said.

Nan Nelson Interview, OH 422-071, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Mel built an airstrip and a large shop for aircraft repair. They also expanded the grocery business.

“If people wanted something special, I’d bring it back because I went into town (Missoula) every Friday and got fresh produce and stuff,” she said. When customers asked for special orders, Nan would oblige. “That’s how I learned what eggplant looked like. This one lady said, “I want two nice eggplants” and I said, ‘Fine.’ So when I got in (to the Missoula store) I had to ask the produce people what eggplants looked like -- I didn’t know!”

Nelson’s Grocery catered to the summer people who vacationed in the Swan Valley, especially at Lindbergh and Holland lakes. “It was really great,” Nan said.

But the winters were slower. “We had a few people who would buy groceries up here, and it just seemed like it worked out,” she said. Mel also helped the loggers, and delivered gas or fuel to bulk tanks in the valley. “There was a lot of logging then too, and so we had a lot of diesel fuel that we sold. We couldn’t have made it on just one or the other, but we could make it if we combined everything,” she said.

Mel’s reputation as a man who could fix anything spread far and wide. “He was always the one who dealt with the mechanical requests. One year it was really cold, it was 40 below for weeks and weeks and people were having a terrible time getting cars started and stuff. This one guy called and said, ‘Oh, I can’t get my car started. I just don’t know what I’m going to do. I just can’t get my car started. And Mel says, ‘Well I’ll come over and help you get the car started.’ So he went over and I think he worked for about three hours trying to get that car started. He finally got the car started and he said, ‘What are you going to do?’ and the fellow replied, ‘I’m not going to do anything. I just wanted to know if I could get the car started!’ Mel was so mad,” Nan recalled.

Nan nurtures the memories of her adventures with Mel, but she doesn’t hesitate to create adventures of her own. A few years ago, she and Ona Lake boarded cruise vessels and toured the Panama Canal, first, then Alaska. And her days are filled with activities. She enjoys dining out, and watching good plays in Missoula. She belongs to several organizations including the Swan Valley Senior Citizens, Condon Community Church, and the newly formed Red Hat Society.
Overall, Nan provides much-appreciated social nurturing to her neighbors and friends, and a welcoming home to the four cats and nearly two dozen Christmas cactuses that enjoy her hospitality.

[End of Interview]