Interview with William Yensen by Floyd Cowles on 22 July 1984 for the Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH# 133-120.

FC Floyd Cowles interviewing Bill Yensen for the Smokejumper Oral History Project at the University of Montana in Missoula on Sunday, July 22nd, 1984. Bill, provide me an autobiography of yourself before we get further into the interview.

BY OK. I was born in Brighton, Colorado, on November 10, 1932. At the time we lived in Geary, Nebraska, but my momma went home to her momma to have her kids. And I lived there until I was about... first grade, then we moved to Carnie, Nebraska... a little town outside of Carnie, Nebraska. I lived there 'til the fifth grade. Then I moved to Homedale, Idaho, and I grew up there on the farm there in Homedale. While I was going to high school in Homedale, my sisters went with two guys, LaVon Scott and Merle Cables, who became smokejumpers in 1948 right after they graduated from high school. My middle sister, Charlotte, married Merle Cables and this is the way that I got interested in smokejumping. But anyway, after I got through my sophomore year at Homedale, then we moved to California and I finished high school down there, then I went to the University of Redlands. And it was during my time at the University of Redlands that I started smokejumping because I needed some kind of a job in the Summers that could support me while I was going to school. After having finished the University of Redlands, I went to San Diego State, got my teaching credential, and then I was immediately drafted and I spent two years in Germany... or, a year and a half in Germany. And when I got out of the Army, I jumped the summer of '58. Then I started teaching in the fall of '58, and I've been teaching in the San Diego area in the Sweetwater Union High School District ever since.

FC Uh, what subjects do you mostly teach?

BY Well, when I first started teaching, I taught biology and I have a master's degree in physical education. I taught biology, I coached baseball, football, and then later on I changed from baseball and football to golf and wrestling, but I've coached nearly all my career as a teacher. And I taught at Mar Vista High School for eighteen years, and now I'm at Sweetwater High School. And it's interesting that smokejumping had a big effect on my teaching career, because when I started jumping I had a little "Brownie" box camera. I jumped with it about four times and finally broke it my leg pocket. But I took a few pictures that got me interested in taking better pictures. So the second year I jumped, I talked to one of our jumpers that was running around with a rololflex and thought he was a great photographer, a guy named Ray Beesley.

FC I know Ray.

BY And he advised me as to what camera to buy, so I believed him and I bought a little Bolsey, which was a little smaller than
the old Argus C-3 which was prevalent at that time—a little better camera. So I got the Bolsey and started shooting pictures of jumpers back in 1954, that was my second year. And... so I took pictures with the Bolsey and... you know, slides. In '54 and '55 and then, of course, I got drafted in '56 and when I got in the Army, I got to be real good friends with a guy I went through the whole Army time with, and he was an ex-photography teacher. So I picked his mind for two years and learned photography from him. Then when I got out of the service I started teaching, I taught biology for four years and then after the four years of biology, I got a chance to start teaching photography because the guy that was teaching photography moved up to be a vice-principal, you know, he was climbing the ladder. So there's a job for me and I've taught photography for twenty years. Just enjoyed the heck out of it. And basically, that covers it.

FC How many years did you jump? You started in '53 and it's to date, but you had a couple years in the Army.

BY OK. I jumped in '53, '54, '55; then I was in the Army, '56, '57. When I got out of the Army, I got back in Germany in April and I immediately went back down to San Diego and hunted up a job for teaching, but that the started next fall, so then I came to McCall and jumped in '58. And then '59 and '60 I had Army summer camps I had to go to and they were right at the first of August so I figured, "Well, that's gonna blow the fire season anyway." You know, when you take a month... you know, take a week right out of there, so I didn't jump those two years. Then in '61 I went back to McCall and jumped again, and I've been jumping every season since then. I set one record at McCall that will never be broken: I lived in the same little trailer in the jumper trailer park for sixteen years.

FC How many jumps have you had... fire jumps?

BY I have 156 fire jumps. I haven't got one yet this year. Still looking for that one. This year I went to Alaska and packed chutes for four days and then they ran out of chutes for us to pack.

[INTERRUPTION]

FC Bill, let's get into your first year in 1953. Can you describe your training, and first fire jump, and sillies, and things like that?

BY Yeah. I remember that pretty well. When I started jumping, the requirements to be a jumper were to be a farm boy and, therefore, I qualified. I was probably as green as anybody that ever became a smokejumper. I remember showing up, knocking on the door and it was kind of raining and about the 1st of June, and Lloyd Johnson, who was the boss at that time, said, "Oh, you're Bill Yensen, you're that crazy nut that wants to be a smokejumper. So anyway, when we... in the old days, we used to
have what they called the "Ten Day Project" at the very beginning of your training.

FC This is at McCall?

BY Yeah. So what we'd do is we'd take... we'd go out with a foreman or a... well, we didn't have foremen, but a squad leader and go out in the woods and work a ten day shift and they would just work us for six hours and, theoretically, train us for two hours. Well, I lucked out and got to go out with Wayne Webb, and we went to Chamberlain Basin. And we rolled up telephone wire from Stonebreaker Ranch up towards Hide A Point, and we got up to were it was pulling up from under the snow and so we had to quit that, but we did spend about four or five days up there doing that. And in the meantime they taught me how to climb trees, and how to swing a pulaski, and how to cut with a crosscut saw, and do the, you know, the basic tools that we use in fire fighting. And after we got done up there, we went back down to the Chamberlain Airport and we worked on the new landing strip that was just being put in. It was the east-west landing strip. The north-south one had been there, but the east-west one, we cleared some of the trees for. And I have a couple of instances that were kind of interesting on that trip. At that time I was a college baseball player and Wayne was was a baseball nut, so Wayne and I took the baseball mitt and glove and took them out there and I was out on the airstrip throwing him some... you know, keeping my arm in shape. And Val Simpson, who was the ranger, came out and said, "Let me catch it." So I threw Val a curve ball that about blew his mind, and bounced off his shin, you know, he missed it... it hit the ground and bounced off his shin and about two, three weeks later he caught me in McCall and he got me drunk on talking baseball because he really liked baseball, too. Oh, let's see, there's a couple other instance, when we were up there rolling up that telephone wire, we'd been up there for four days and we got filthy. So we decided to go take a bath. So we went down to the West Fork of Chamberlain Creek, jumped in, got out and picked out soap off of the snow bank that it was sitting on. Soaped up and jumped in again. I think that was probably the coldest water I ever got in. We kind of dared each other to do it and we did it anyway. But anyway, we did our own cooking and at that time we didn't get per diem, we didn't get anything. We had to just go down and buy our food, you know, and take it out there. And Jim Larken flew us out in the old Travelaire and that was my first Forest Service airplane ride, needless to say. And Jim's brother, Rusty was on the crew, he was... I think we was second year jumper. The other guys that were out there with me were Bob Newbrough, Mike Gara, a guy named Wilson, he was a forestry student and he picked out some shrub and he said, "That's a coleagone." And so we called him "Colie" Wilson from then on. And let's see, Gene Ellis... and Gene Ellis eventually spotted me on my first training jump. But anyway we spent that two weeks out there and then went back to McCall and went through ground training. And my trainer was a guy named Seymour Peterson, and we was an ornery son-of-a-gun. I remember he put... I put my jump pants on the first time, "spread your
legs boy," and he kicked me right in the crotch, just as hard as he could and lifted me a foot off of the ground and I was very impressed by the jump pants having that big strap protecting the family jewels. So, anyway I don't remember a great deal about the training except that it was very difficult to make letdowns with the system we had then cotton hemp, I mean cotton sash rope. You had to thread it around through a harness some silly way and then we had to make a loop and stand in the loop so we could undo the snaps. And I remember Seymour made us do 75 pushups once. He was real strong in the arms, he couldn't run very good, but he was very strong in the arms and he made us do 75 pushups. And I remember running the obstacle course and jumping off the tower. We had an old wooden tower and a hemp rope on it. And you really got a thump on that hemp rope cause no stretch. Nowadays we have nylon rope on the towers. It's sort of like jumping a B bag. But this was like jumping a flat bag. See, the first jump I ever made...

FC First fire jump?

BY What?

FC First fire jump or just jump?

BY No. Talking about the very first jump.

FC Training jump.

BY First training jump. We jumped out of the Travelaire. Gene Ellis was spotting. I can remember it was a really beautiful bright morning and the airplane roared and took off down the runway and I was looking up away from the sun and then I saw the shadow of the wheels leave the ground and I kept watching that shadow of the airplane get smaller and smaller and I looked at that and I thought, "what the Hell am I doing here."

FC That was your first flight?

BY No. That I... that was, see I had gone out to Chamberlain and back in that plane and I had flown twice when I was a little kid. My dad knew somebody that had an airplane so I had been off the ground before. But I just wondered what the hell am I doing here. And so we got up there and I think I was about the second guy out and the first guy went, so that gave me a little confidence. Well, if he can do it maybe I can. So, I... they told us to sit there and look at the horizon and look straight out and then you just go out there and drop. And I remember Gene Ellis slapping me on the back and saying, "Hit here, Billy," and I went out and it opened and they had a megaphone down there they hollered at us with so they'd tell us which string to pull. And I lit a little too stiff and pulled a muscle under my right knee, had a little sore knee after that. Then the next day we jumped the Ford and I, for some crazy reason, thought you were supposed to relax, and I jumped out there and just totally relaxed and I got over on my head and the chute just popped open and sprained
my neck. And so I missed the next jump because I couldn't even look up hardly. I kept a heat pad on it that night and got it limbered up and then the next day I caught up, I made two jumps and caught up with them. And then the day after that we made two jumps. And then we jumped in a jack pine strip and I was real proud of myself on that because of the Neds that jumped in there, I was one of three that got into the spot and didn't tree up. Jack pine strip was a real narrow spot. And then we had one more jump after that and that was our practice fire and that turned out to be the first fire I ever fought and of course all we had was a little slash they had piled up and we put it out. But I remember that jump real well too, because I got so many twists on my canopy and when I opened... see, I had a cable that went up there about 20 feet and I did a... must of did 15 or 20 turns. In fact, the people on the ground were a little excited because my chute open... had a delayed opening because of that. But I was twisted up... I didn't get untwisted until I was almost to the ground. But fortunately I just landed in a big old sage brush spot and no problem. So anyway that ended the training and I remember we used to have our classroom work in the old nursery and they taught us map reading and fire reports and that kind of stuff, and first aid. But that's basically about all I remember about that.

Then we went to work and the '53 fire season got rolling about the 10th of July and we had... we started jumping just about everybody. And I made my first fire jump on the 11th of July. Had a fire up on War Eagle, right near... well it's about a mile from War Eagle, which is a lookout north of McCall, and they were ferrying guys up there two at a time in the old Travelaire and I think Bob Thornton and I were the 7th or 8th guys to get there. We were the last load they dropped on the fire. Wayne Webb was on it. Paperlegs Peterson was on it. And other than that I can't remember, but it was about 3 or 4 acres and that's a pretty good load for 7 or 8 guys. So anyway, I remember Lloyd Johnson, who was the boss then, spotted me on my first jump and we got up there and I don't remember that much about getting out of the airplane, but I do remember where I landed, I landed in a snow bank. I missed the spot by about a quarter of a mile. But it was a nice soft landing in that big old snow bank.

FC What were you thinking about as you were flying to the drop...

BY I really can't remember that much what I thought about then. But during training I had become totally blown away by how neat it was to jump. I just thought jumping was so fun. That I was looking forward to it. Of course, when you're making your first fire jump, you look down there and see all those trees, a little bitty spot and oh, I do remember a little bit now when I start thinking about it. I remember, "boy that sure doesn't look like much of a spot," but I remembered I hit jack pine strip so I thought, "well Hell, maybe I can do it." So I kind of looked forward to it. But I remember missing the spot badly and landing in that snow bank. I remember fighting the fire. We used snow
to put fire out. We had a big snow bank right handy to the fire. That kept our juices and our food nice and cold and I remember the first night on the fire. We were sleeping, or trying to and about 2 o'clock in the morning an alpine fir torched out and just went whoosh. And everybody popped up out of their bags and looked at it and old Wayne looked at it and says, "piss on her, let her burn." Back he went, down and went to sleep. So we all did. I think we spent two days up there and then we had to carry our packs from the fire up to War Eagle where there's a road. And it was reasonably steep and I remember carrying that pack up there the first time and thought, "good Lord, this is terrible, these darn things are heavy." And of course that was back in the old E bag days when we carried the elephant bags. So anyway, that was about the end of that one. Then, the next... oh, we left a ground pounder on the fire and the fire did one of its go down the root and come up on the other side of the line tricks, and the next week we jumped the same fire. So, I made my first two fire jumps for the same spot.

FC Did you get chewed out for abandoning the fire?

BY No, we didn't abandon it. We left a... we left a pounder up there. Now they sent a district guy up there and he was patrolling the fire, but they wanted to get the smokejumpers back cause things are heating up. So, the next week I went back there and jumped it again, only this time they called it the Box Fire, because over at the other side it was the old Box Mine, it burned that way. And it went to 40 acres. I remember one thing especially about this. We had a Pacific Marine Pump running and here's the difference between smokejumpers and non smokejumpers. There were two smokejumpers and a ground pounder working on this pump and they were ding around with the section hose trying to get it in a better place and messing with it and of course Pacific Marine's turn about 9 grand and they just howl. You know, you've heard them. And you can't hear anything. They just, you know, just a tremendous noise. Well, I was out on the end of the hose running the nozzle, and Wayne Webb was back there kind of dragging hose and these two jumpers and this ground pounder were messing with the pump and Wayne saw a tree burn off about half up, and here comes the top of that tree down right towards these guys. And he just waved his arms so they would see him. The two jumpers reacted instantly and disappeared, the pounder stood right there and got hit by the tree. And it gave him a bad concussion and he was out for, I think 10 days. And of course we... he just layed there and quivered like a pole axed steer. So, we didn't know what to do. So, we got him in the first aid position and then he started clawing at his head and there was a jumper there named Ron Cyful[?] that I played football with down at Homedale, when I was living down there. And he and I went through training together, but anyway he weighed about 180 pounds, he was strong. And this guy that had got hit was only about a 150 pounder and about 6' 3". You know, just a string bean type. And he started clawing at his head so Ron grabbed his arm and tried to hold it and he just waved Ron around... just waved him around with that arm. Oh, another thing
I remember about this fire was the guy that spotted me on my first one, Gene Ellis, landed in some jack pine up at the top of the fire when he made his jump. He missed the spot and landed over in the jack pine and when he hit the top of this one tree, it stopped him. And then his chute lost air and after that he broke out of the tree and fell head long to the ground. You know, just in a nose dive for the ground. And he said he got about ten feet off the ground and his chute caught him up in the tree tops. But when he came out of there he had eyes as big as saucers. He says, "I don't know if I ever want to do this again." That really frightened him.

FC You hear so many of those near misses all of the time, but yet something happens that they get away without serious injury.

BY Well anyway, while we were treating this guy, Ellis ran up the hill to try and get help and try to get something for a stretcher and all he could find was a cargo chute so they brought a cargo chute down and they made a couple of sticks and put the guy on it and carried him up the hill and they took him out and took him to Council hospital. And I guess they had to bore a couple of holes in his head to let the pressure out. But it was really funny because they had 50 pickup firefighters and none of them had hard hats. All jumpers had hard hats. But these guys didn't.

FC In that year they were just starting...

BY Yeah. They were just starting to get into safety. So, the next day, needless to say, there were hard hats on everybody. But that was a pretty graphic point, you know, if the guy had a hard hat on it wouldn't have hurt him. But it glanced off the back of his head and just pole axed him. OK, that was my second fire jump. [INTERRUPTION] After I got back from this fire jump, I was lucky enough to get to work in the loft. Because Wayne Webb and I were playing baseball. By the way, when I was going through jump training, in the week that I went through jump training, I pitched four 9 inning baseball games. One on a Saturday, one on the next Sunday, one on Wednesday night way up in Grangeville, got back at 4 o'clock from that run up to Grangeville, and then had to get up and jump the next morning, and then I had one the next Saturday. So, we played a lot of baseball there. And that was a lot of fun. But anyway, Wayne and I got to be great friends through the baseball, and he was the loft foreman so he got me in the loft and I learned how to rig. Well, while I was in there learning to rig Paperlegs Peterson was in there, he was one of the old hands, and old Paperlegs was an expert needler. So all the time I was packing my first chute he was right there needling me a little bit, "now you be sure get this done right and be sure and get that done right." Then we got a fire call for down on Blind Creek, on the Challis. And that's about a two hour flight in the Ford. So, guess who's sitting right next to me in the Ford all the way down there, Paperlegs Peterson. And he needled me all the way down there. And I wasn't really sure if I had done everything right.
on that chute. And he was talking about crystallization of the D rings and all kinds of stuff and he had me so shook up that I got down there to jump. I hopped out and the chute did open and I looked up at it and I was so thrilled that my first chute that I ever packed opened. I didn't pull the string out. I just rode it down wherever it took me. I lit about a quarter of a mile away from everybody else in a big old pile of rocks and there was a three foot round patch of dirt in the middle of the rocks and I put my feet right in the middle of it. So, there's another one of those situations that smokejumpers just happen to pull through. But I was just so spaced out from him needling me, because I was just green as grass, at that time. So anyway that was my third fire jump. Fourth one, I think was Bernard Mountain down on... down on the Boise. And that was up high in some alpine fir. I remember that was my first tree up. I landed in the side of an alpine fir and slid down a ways before my chute really caught up. And I remember that fire real well because one patch of alpine fir would burn and sparks would go up and land in the next patch and then pretty quick it would get going and the sparks would go to the next patch. And so, finally I took a back pack pump which was made out of canvas, and we had a guy named Muldoon up there from Boise, or from Idaho City and when he was running around, he said "well, want a water cooled asshole with this thing." But it just kept your back soaked. But anyway, I took one of these and went up to the next patch and sat there. And when the sparks came I put them out and by golly we caught the fire there. But we thrashed through all that work, all afternoon. And I remember coming off that fire, we had a guy named Pat Daily that was in the crew and we had the mules carrying our stuff and we were trying to get the mules through a picket. So, we had to get our pulaskis out and chop down a bunch of things and it was real brushy and old Pat took a wild swing at some brush and got hung up and the pulaski came down and cut his boot. And he looked down there and he had a red sock on and he didn't cut his foot, but he cut his boot open and he could see that red sock and he passed out. He just folded up. And then he got up and looked, took his boot off. Wow, no wound. But he looked down and saw that red and got white as a sheet and just keeled over. That's about all I remember about that one. Let's see, after that, I think the next one was the first jump I ever got injured on. And this was the Oxbow Fire over on Hell's Canyon. And there was a Ford load of us jumped early in the morning. And we had pretty good drift, probably three or four hundred yards, maybe more than that, because I remember when I came in, I was moving pretty fast, and when I hit, my right foot went in a gopher hole, I was in a kind of a sage brushy spot, and my right foot went down this gopher hole, and I did my Allen roll and when I rolled that foot didn't turn and so I heard a big loud pop and I sprained my ankle. Well, you know how sprains are. When you first get them they don't hurt much. So, I jumped up and stomped around and laced up my boot tight and we were looking for Stence Miller, he was one of the guys, and we couldn't find him and we looked over and finally saw this parachute laying under a snag and what had happened, old Stence had landed on a branch about 20 feet up on the snag and had stopped him and then
the branch broke and he fell straight down, about 20 feet and his knees buckled on him and his mask came down and hit his knee and knocked him out. And it also damaged the cartilage in his knee, so he couldn't straighten his leg out. So, we dug around under the chute and found him and then a couple of minutes he came to. So, we had to get out the old SPF radio and on those radios you had to string up an antennae that went... you had to climb a tree and string up the old antennae. And we called McCall and said we got a dinged jumper. Well, at that point in time, I didn't know how bad I was hurt. I was walking all right. So, they sent the packer out and we fought the fire, and of course by noon I was limping badly, by 6 o'clock when the packer came in I was using the Pulaski for a cane and just barely making it. So, here comes the packer with one pack mule and the bell mare that he was riding. And he got there about six. So we ate supper and then we started out. I rode mule and Spence rode the bell mare and poor old Lindey, the packer, had to walk.

FC That's pretty tough for a packer.

BY You got that right.

FC I had one that would take a horse to go 20 feet across the road.

BY Well, poor old Lindey, he had to walk. And we had to go up a big rock slide that had switch backs in it and I remember [that] going up there, that old mule never made a rock move. And the horse was just thrashing around. And then we got up to a saddle where there must have been 15 or 20 cow trails came into the saddle. One of those is the trail, and how can you tell at midnight when your running around with a lantern in your hand. And poor old Lindey got to the saddle and he walked down one for a ways and that ain't it and he'd walk down another for a ways. So, I just gave the mule his head and the mule picked one and took off and got down there about a quarter of a mile I finally come to a tree and it had blaze on it. So, I knew we had the right one. But you know, I didn't know where to go, Lindey didn't know where to go, Spence didn't know where to go, horse didn't know where to go, mule knew. So we got into Council hospital about 3 o'clock in the morning and they x-rayed my foot and it was just a sprain and I asked them when I could jump on it again and they said, "as soon as you can stand it, you know, tape it up." I told them I was a P.E. major and I knew how to tape, so we got back to McCall and that next day I worked in the loft. I hobbled up and down the loft tables and then the day after that I was off and I was hurt so I took off and went down to Parmer to see my uncle. And then I went over to the old Homedale dance and see all my old friends that I had gone to high school with and I danced on it. So it didn't feel too bad. So, I figured Sunday, well I'll go back to McCall. So, I went back up to McCall and got there about noon and they said, "we're low on jumpers can you do 'er." And I said, "well let me tape 'er up good." So I took and put some new tape on it, laced up my boot tight and got in the Ford and I rode around that Ford all day and finally that
evening Ron Cyful and I, the guy that I had gone to high school with, made a two manner up on... just out of town there, up on towards Lake Creed Summit. They called it Mackie Lake or Golden Lake Ridge. And I remember landing, I had one foot, my good foot was down, my... I just totally picked up my bad one and it was late in the evening and we landed pretty soft anyway.

But the next day, after we had got the fire out, we had to carry our packs down to the road. And it was straight down about a mile. I mean really steep. And as long as I didn't turn my ankle sideways, it didn't bother too much, but boy I was really hurting when I got down to the road. So anyway, that was the end of that jump. Then the next day, Gene Crosby and I jumped out in Chamberlain in Plessey Meadow. And when we flew over the thing, we looked down there and see the meadow and see the fire. Of course, in Chamberlain it's so thick with trees, you know, that it's just unbelievable. You get under the trees, you can't see the sky. And so anyway, we jumped in the meadow and we thought this'd be a piece of cake, you know, they're gonna drop our cargo up on the fire so we won't have to carry it up there and then we'll have to go down to Three Blaze Trail back to Chamberlain. We did have about a seven mile walk off after that. But anyway, we jumped in the meadow, we walked up the hill expecting to find the fire. "Where's the fire?" We couldn't find it. We walked around that hill 'til 2:00 in the morning trying to find that damn fire. And, of course, all our food, our sleeping bags, are on the fire. So we were lost, so we finally went back down to the meadow and rolled up in our mains and put our jumpsuits and then rolled up in our mains to keep the mosquitoes off of us. We slept 'til morning. As soon as it got daylight, we went back up the hill and I found the tallest tree and I shinnied up that tree just like a cub bear and I got to where I could just see out over the top of the rest of the trees. And I saw that the meadow was laying ninety degrees from what we thought it was. You know, when we looked at it from the air, we had it figured, when we got on the ground, we just got ninety degrees off. And so then I looked to where the fire was, and I could see the smoke, no problem. So I went down and I hooted for Gene and we hot footed over to the fire and we got there and, of course, we were starving to death, we didn't have anything to eat since noon the day before. So we tore into our packs and we were just about ready to take a bite of something to eat, when the damn fire crowned a tree, and we had to go fight fire for two hours before we could even eat. And I remember, the year after that, I saw a report that they did, some of the big-shot foresters figured out what would have happened if no jumpers had got to this fire, and they figured we saved $500,000.00 by nipping that fire.

FC It had quite a potential then?

BY Oh, man, did it! In 1966, that whole area burned in the Big Plessey Burn and that fire cost $1,000,000.00 and I think it cost one life, too. But anyway, we finally got the fire knocked down and we finally got something to eat. Then there was a little fat negro and big tall... no, it was a little fat Mexican and big tall negro came in to relieve us.
FC District Crew?

BY Yeah, they were District Crew. And they were the funniest Mutt and Jeff I ever saw, they were just as funny as all get out. So anyway...

FC Well, what about them was funny? Besides Mutt and Jeff?

BY Oh, just the way they talked. I can't remember anything they said, but I remember they were funny. You know, they were just humorous types of people. But anyway, they relieved us and they said, "You guys get into Chamberlain and they're gonna fly you out tonight." So we packed up all our stuff. I remember Gene and I were eating another meal to get charged up for going down the trail and I told Gene, "Well, it doesn't take too much to keep me going once I get out on the trail." And he said, "Yeah, it sure takes a lot to get me started." And so anyway, Gene and I packed up our stuff and we walked down the Three Blaze Trail back to Chamberlain and they flew us back to McCall. Let's see, the fire jump after that, I think, was Square Top with Bob Donnelley. I might have these out of order because I don't have my list with me. But anyway, Catlin dropped Donnelley and I on Square Top.

FC What forest is this?

BY This is on the Salmon and it's right near the Montana border. And this was an extraordinary fire because we had about a half mile of drift and I think Cat kicked us out at about 1,000 feet. And we came screaming into the ground, and I treed up in a little snag and I jumped an old candy-striped Ervin chute. It was a FS-1, it didn't have a tail on it, but it was candy-striped so you could see it good. I remember Bob Donnelley hit and rolled over a log and he was laying there just about out and I was trying to get out of the tree, you know, the crazy letdown situation there, you couldn't just pop your capewells and get out, you just had to thrash to get out. So I was trying to get out of the tree and he... he finally comes to a little bit and he says, "Oh, my gosh!" He says, "I think I broke my back!" So I got frantic, you know, I finally got down and then he comes walking over there and he says, "I don't know which leg to limp on." [laugh] And we walked over to the fire and it was a log that was laid out in this meadow like. And lightning must have hit it and there was only a piece of it about a foot long left. So we turned it over and pissed on it and put it out [laughs] and that was all the fire fighting we did. Oh we dug a line around it, you know make it look... but anyway then we dig around there awhile and the old square top lookout was right there near it. So we went up on the lookout and made our camp in the lookout. Four o'clock in the morning we heard thump, thump, thump... something's coming up... stairs. And we didn't think there was anybody in the area, so we got our pulaskis out and we were getting ready to defend the ramparts from the bear that was coming up to get us. [laughs] And then we heard the bell mare and
turns out that the packer had been over on West Horse about fifteen miles away. And he saw my chute in a tree over there. Well, he knew... I'm going have to go get him anyway. [laughs]

FC  Just well do it.

BY  I just well do her now. He'd been out supplying West Horse Lookout. So he saw the... saw my chute over there. So he came over and it took him all that time to get there. Well, he got there at four o'clock. So we bundled up everything and about daylight we took off and he had a couple of empty pack mules and said we could ride them if we wanted to... I tried that for about half mile... there was no way I'd rather walk.

FC  On a decker saddle?

BY  Oh man, I'll tell ya. We didn't have anything to pad with or anything so we walked. But anyway we had to go clear around to Wa Mountain and then clear back to West Horse and then we went down the hill to the Salmon River. And I remember we were walking along this trail that had been eroded out by the years of people going through it. And Donnelley's walking along there and all of a sudden there's a rattlesnake right near his hand. Luckily we saw it quick enough and the snake didn't bite him, but it was close. Then we got down to the edge of these switchbacks and we were standing there looking at that, we looked over to one side and there's a great big refrigerator size rock... just tipping on the edge. So being the good smokejumpers we were we went over and rolled that rock. We worked and worked and finally got it to go and that rock was as big as a refrigerator and that hill was so steep and so far down that we didn't even get to see the splash you know when it hit the river. It just went out of sight. And then we walked down one switchback and thought that was too slow so we just ran straight down the hill... just jumped and I remember I about ruined a pair of boots doing that. Well, anyway, then we finally got back to the end of the road and that was the end of the 30 mile walkoff, which was the longest walkoff I ever had. Luckily I didn't have to carry the pack. Well that's see, then we went back in the truck to Salmon. Got... spent one night in Salmon. We got a night in the bars and had a good time. Then got flown back to McCall. Let's see, after that... I think the next one was Red Mountain down on the Challis and this was one where I should've got killed. This is probably my closest brush with death in the whole business.

FC  Well, elaborate on that one.

BY  OK. Reed Jackson was spotting and by this time I knew what was going on. I had been watching the spotters and we had a bunch of old pilot chutes that we used for drift chutes and then we had some that we made out of muslin. Take a square piece of muslin and tie strings on it and then they'd weigh so much sand and put in a sack and they'd throw those out. Well, we had some that went down slow and some went down fast. Now the guys... they're all supposed to go down at the same speed but we had some
that I knew that went down fast, some went down slow. And Jackson used one of these that went down fast and it went right down the spot. They never timed them in those days. Nowadays, we time our streamers. But we just watched where they went. And I knew this was one of the heavy ones and I was the first guy out so I knew I wasn't going to get carried as far as the other guy. But I wasn't going to argue with Jackson because he was the boss. So anyway, he kicked us out and I turned my chute into the wind and went against it all the way down and I got blown over to the jump spot, just like I thought I would. And I hit the top of a Doug fir that was right at the very peak of the jump spot. The jump spot was real steep. But anyway, this was right at the peak of it. I can remember hitting the top of that tree and I grabbed two branches about as big around as my fingers, tried to hang on, and then I don't remember anything until I got up off of the ground and bumped my head on a log and I was down in a jackpot of logs and my chute was just fluttering down like a handkerchief. And the guys on the ground, there had already been some guys from Idaho City that had jumped it. There was a guy named Frank Tweety that saw it, and he saw... I fell half way down the tree, about 75 feet, and then my chute reinflated and saved my butt.

FC You're luckier than heck.

BY You got that right. Well anyway, after the two of us jumped, the rest of them went to Challis and set down because the wind was coming up. And later that evening Catlin and Webb jumped and Webb to this day says that's the hardest he ever hit the ground. It was about 9500 feet. And uh... then I remember something else good about that one. We worked all night, did good on it, got the fire knocked down and the next morning we were just getting ready to go cook some breakfast and somebody comes running up there and says, "hey you guys, pack up your stuff and get it over here, packer's coming and we're going to go off..." so we just forgot about eating. And we packed up our gear and took it over to the packer and he put it on the mules. Then we took off walking. And they... we had to walk down to the road that come up from Bonanza. And they said there'll be a truck down there waiting for you. So, we walked and ran ten miles down to that truck in just a little over an hour and a half. We were really jacked, we were getting out of there.....

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[BEGIN SIDE TWO]

BY So anyway, we drank this Lucky Lager right down because we were all hot and tired and when we got down to the Ranger Station I almost fell out of the truck. That was probably the cheapest drunk I ever got on. OK, that was the end of that one. And then [I] had another one out there in the same country, right across from West Horse was the next fire jump. And that was one that I will never forget. Because they kicked me out right over the middle of the Salmon River canyon and the jump spot was right up near the very top of the canyon. So, I was looking down at
probably a mile and a half to this damn river, and that kind of frightened me a little bit. So, I ran with the wind and went over the jump spot and then I turned around and I couldn't get back to it. So, I landed in a great big yellow pine. And uh... so I did my letdown. I had a hundred feet of rope and I had 5 feet left when I got down to the ground. So, we fought our fire and got it out and then I had to go back up and get my chute. Well they dropped us some spurs, and when I got the spurs, they were pole spurs, not tree spurs. And the pole spurs only had... they only stick out about three quarters of an inch, where tree spurs are an inch and a half. Well the bark on this yellow pine, it was about a 5 foot diameter base, it was a good three, four inches thick at the bottom and up near the top it was a couple of inches thick. So, I could never get those spurs to get into wood. So, I had to climb up there and going up wasn't too bad because I had my rope and I just went up the rope. And of course in those days all we got we spurs, nothing else. Spurs and a fannel saw and that's it.

FC No belt.

BY No belt, oh no.

FC Of course it would have been too big probably.

BY So, anyway I climbed up and sawed out the main and threw it down. There went my rope. And so I had to climb back down that 95 feet of trunk with my fingernails and those pole spurs. Well, when I got down, I was just soaked in sweat and quivering from exhaustion. That was probably the most dangerous thing I ever did. And then, it was kind of neat though when the packer came to get us, he brought saddle horses and we had a 14 mile ride down to the river and then another 10 miles up to the... where his truck was. So, that's one where I got to come off on a saddle horse. Then the last fire jump that year was up at Pittsburgh landing on the Nez Perce and we jumped a Ford load of us above a grass fire and we went down and tied into rock slide and dug lines straight across the top of the hill and burned it out and we caught the fire by about 10 feet. When the fire front came up to us, we had about 10 feet of line sticking out. And we beat it out a little bit down the hill and stopped it. And the next day a Doug from Missoula came in and dropped a whole Doug load of water on the old baseball chutes and this pilot dropped in to low and they all streamered except about a dozen bundles, out of the whole Doug load. I remember they streamered our lunch, our mashed potatoes and gravy and all that stuff was just scrambled when we finally got to eat it. Then when we came off that, we had to go up and get our gear. It was way at the top of the hill and we packed up our E bags and we rode them down the hill. We went over in the grass where it hadn't burned and just sat on them and just rode them. When it got too steep for that, we turned them loose and just let them roll down the hill. And that was the end of my first year.

FC Quite a lot of jumps really for the first year?
BY Yeah. I had 11 fire jumps my first year.

FC How about '54 then, the next year.

BY OK. '54 I had six, and the ones I remember out of that, I remember I jump up at Goose Lake and the skeats [mosquitoes] were so bad they were almost like Alaska.

FC Again, what forest?

BY This was on the Payette.

FC Payette.

BY I jumped that one and we sawed down a big snag and when they dropped the saw they broke it right in two. That happens quite a bit with crosscuts. So, we had a five foot tree to saw down with half a saw. And two of us worked on it for about six hours getting it down. And after we had worked for about three hours here was another one of those lucky things, we went and took a break and sat down and the top of the tree fell. And it came down so quick, we would have never got out from under it. But we just took a break and sat down and were looking at it and all of the sudden, crash!, here comes down a ton of wood.

FC Burned through and...

BY Yeah. It was burning up there, we knew that. But you can't tell how much it's holding. But we had just taken a break and wham! down she came. Let's see, then I had another one over on Gibson Creek down on the Boise, just south of McCall, up from the Cascade reservoir. And I remember that one because I got in trouble on it. I walked off of it because we had been there three days and packer never showed up. And we were out of food and everything else. So, we walked over to No Business and caught a ride back with the project crew. And then our packs are out there and the boss got after me because we'd left our packs. But we left them on the trail with a note and turns out that the packer found them easily and brought them in. But I did get a little rashing out of that. And let's see, I don't remember too many of the other ones in '54. They don't stick in my mind that well. This is when I started taking pictures and.... Oh yeah, I had... here's one that's a really good one. I didn't jump on this run but it was a very wild ride in the Ford. We went out to the west side and started dropping jumpers and we dropped three different little fires and I was the last guy in the Ford which carried eight and I remember the first bunch we dropped. We dropped them right in a band of sheep. And one guy when he landed, told us later that three sheep ran into his canopy and got all tangled up. And there was a bunch of clouds that came in from the east and... just a kind of a front or something, real fluffy white clouds, just covered up everything. And we dropped this one... the next bunch we dropped we got them down and then the clouds covered everything up and they wanted a radio. So, we
came around and Jim Larken kicked out the radio just by guess and by golly and it almost landed on them. You know, you couldn't even see the ground. So, then we went over to Hell's Canyon and went right down the bottom of it. We're down probably a thousand feet off the river and at that point the canyon is about 7000 feet deep. So we're down... way down in the bottom flying around in the Ford. And in about two minutes the canyon blew full of clouds and you couldn't see anything. And flying around in that narrow canyon is a little shakey. So Jim Larken put that Ford in a spin going straight up. I couldn't believe what that airplane was doing. And I can remember grabbing one of those square windows and dangling towards the tail. And my fire pack and the cargo chutes and all that stuff was... all that stuff just fell clear back in the bottom of the tailwell, right through the little door, clear back in there.

FC  It socked in that quick?

BY  Yeah. Just that quick. And he put it in a spin going straight up and we came out of the clouds at about 11000 feet. I don't think there's another airplane, other than maybe a turbofoil, that could have got out of there. I doubt if an Otter could get out of there. But that Ford was a great airplane. It would fly 80 mph straight up, straight down or flat, that was it. Oh, in '54 at the beginning of the season, I did go down to Reno, and we flew down in the Travelaire and we were flying over Highway 95 and looked down and the cars were passing us. But we went down and fought the Ball Canyon Fire. And that was the first big fire we fought. And they... being a second year jumper and still pretty green, I didn't know what to think about that. And the first day I was on the line they gave me a whole company of army troops and their Captain, the Company Commander, comes up and says, "well, what do we do." So, we had a half mile line to build and take care of. So I... first thing I thought I oughta do is teach them how not to chop their feet with a pulaski. So, I showed them that. And then we went out and chinked the line and fire burned right up to it and we stomped her out and the worst part is over and those guys did real good.

FC  How big a fire was that?

BY  It was about 10,000 acres.

FC  Pretty big one.

BY  There's another thing that happened on that fire, that I can remember real well. When we were mopping it up, we found this white fir that must have been, oh, 12 feet in diameter and it's burning way up there. So, we cut into it with a chainsaw and we cut into a gusher. That white fir only had about a foot of wood and the rest of it was hollow. And it had been soaking up rain for eons, it must have been four or five hundred years old, it was just like a stand pipe. And we cut into it with a chainsaw, it just gushed water out. And we had to let it sit there and gush for half a day before we could even cut the rest of it down.
It was a piece of cake to cut down, there wasn't much there. But, it was just amazing, we both got drenched. We had a two man Mack with a six foot blade that we were going to cut it down with. And we got into that thing and hit that water and just got drenched because it came out and just... you'd think you busted a fire hydrant. Then we had to cut down a big old sugar pine because there was a woodpecker hole up there about 50 feet and this thing was eight feet in diameter. What a waste. That always just bugged me to see a big tree like that go.

FC Well, it was on fire?

BY It was just a woodpecker hole had some fire in it, way up there. The rest of the tree is all right, but anything with smoke coming out of it, you had to cut down. Well, let's see, what else happened in '54, uh... [INTERRUPTION]

FC Bill, you've got... you've jumped too many years to go through them chronologically, that's quite obvious, we would be here for another two or three days. Let's start hitting some of the fires throughout your jump career that really stick in your mind for various reasons.

BY OK. I remember one fire in '55 where Carl Roselli broke his back and we flew the fire in the Ford and threw streamers and they went about three ridges over. So, we says, "we ain't jumping this." We went to Salmon and set down and these idiots in Salmon made us get on a bus and truck up there. We had to walk ten miles to get to the fire. When we got to the fire that evening, here's the Ford dropping our cargo, perfect jumping conditions and we're played out from walking up the hill. But anyway, the next morning, Carl Roselli and another Doug load jumped on this fire and he got in a vacuum over another chute just as he hit the ground and came down real hard on a rock and hurt his back. And also, the day before some Missoula guys came over and they jumped right after we had turned it down and one of their guys sailed into a rock cliff and rocked up. He didn't tree up. He rocked up. And it broke his collar bone and his leg and his arm and a couple of ribs.

FC You don't remember his name?

BY I don't remember his name. But I remember once we got off the fire we went down to the hospital to see Carl and we could hear this guy moaning. He was out, but just groaning and moaning, it was sad. That spotter from Missoula ought to have had his head examined for throwing those guys out in that condition.

FC Did he recover eventually?

BY I don't know about him. Carl recovered. He was back at it again. He just broke a couple of transverse processes and they came back through the spine. But that was the first fire I ever saw a helicopter on. That was a Bell G-1 and it would just
barely take Carl out and then they had to come back and get the doctor.

FC Now you're talking about 1955?

BY This was 1955.

FC And which forest?

BY That was on the Salmon. It was called the Virginia Gulch Fire.

FC How was the copter used?

BY They just brought the doctor in to supervise getting Carl out without further injury. We didn't move him at all. And then... oh, one other thing I had in '55 that I remember real well, I jumped at the top of Sheep Creek, in what nowadays would have been a piece of cake two manner. But...[INTERRUPTION] Well anyway, nowadays we would have gone out in a helicopter, would have been nothing to it. Then, we had to pack out because they couldn't get a mountain goat up there, much less a horse. There was no trails or anything. We had to carry our packs 16 miles down one draw, up the next ridge, down one draw, up the next ridge and that was the best days work I ever did in my life. And uh... when we were coming around one of these side canyons, we came to a place where there was decomposed granite and it was about a 45 degree slope, sloping down to a cliff that went down probably 200 feet. And we had to tippy-toe across this decomposed granite 45 degree angle slope to get across. Otherwise we'd have to walk an extra mile. So, I looked at it and I thought, "I think I can make it." So, I tippy-toed across and made it and then my jump partner got half way across and slipped. And he's got the E bag on he can't get rid of and he started sliding down that... towards that cliff. And he took his hands and spread eagled and took all the hide off the end of his fingers stopping. And when he finally stopped I said, "don't move." And I got my jump rope out and made a lariat and I roped him and snubbed him off and reeled him in. But I tell you that was... that was really tense. So then we hiked on down to where there was a trail and we dropped our packs on the trail and they came and got them with a horse then. But that was something. OK. Let's just hit some of the really higher spots later on.

I jumped in Redding... or we had a trip to Redding in 1958, when I got out of the service and went down there and the first jump I made down there was in a grove of sugar pine. And they were so big, we jumped from a thousand feet and a quarter of our jump was past the tree tops... or below the tree tops. I remember missing the last tree and picking up my feet just in this last tree, going into the spot and I thought, "hotdog I've got it made." I better get ready to land. And I see these trunks going by and going by and where's the ground. The trunks just keep going by. I was amazed at how long it took to get down past the treetops.
FC A wonder you didn't hang up.

BY Really. Well we had a guy jumped with me, Bill Weaver, had a Mae West, pulled his reserve and he landed in the top of one of these things.

FC What's a Mae West?

BY That's where lines get over the middle of the canopy and makes it look like a big bra.

FC OK.

BY And that makes you come down real fast. And consequently he pulled his reserve, which he was trained to do and you can't steer once you're in that situation, so he landed in the top of one of these sugar pines. And he hollered down and says, "I'm coming down." And I hollered up and said, "no you ain't." Because all he had was 90 feet of jump rope and it was a good 150 feet up to that lowest branch and so finally he got his reserve out and he tied his rope on the reserve and he let all that down from the lowest branch he could sit on and I had to climb up the tree about 50 feet to tie the Fannel[?] saw on and the other three jump ropes. There were four of us jumped the fire. And get the other three jumps ropes on it. And he took that all up, he sawed out his main and he threw all the stuff down then he tied his... tied the four ropes together, dropped one end down to me and then he tied the other end on his harness and he went over this branch and I layed him down. I had the rope over my neck and around under my butt and I just kind of eased him down. But it took darn near all of those four ropes to get him down. Then they dropped our cargo and we had a sugar pine that had cat faced out so big that all four of us could get in the cat face. We had to cut that sucker down. And so we had to get our cargo and my cargo was up this big old Doug fir. I looked at the tree and said, "Aw that won't be too tough to climb. The branches go clear to the ground." We walked over there and it was a long way to that tree. I thought the cargo chute looked pretty small. We got over there and the tree is 15 feet in diameter at the base. And the lowest branch is up there 50 feet and that wasn't the ground that was the canopy of the brush we were looking at. So, I had to put the spurs on and climb that tree. And it was like climbing a wall. Because 15 feet... it was just like flat. And I took three 90 foot jump ropes up there, tied the crosscut on it, when I finally got up there and let it down, it didn't reach the ground. I had to climb down 20 feet to get that crosscut on the ground. So that makes it about a 290 foot tree. That was my highest and biggest climbing ever. Let's see then the years... I've missed the years of '59, '56 and '57 in the Army. Came back in '61 after missing two years in the Army summer camps. In '61 we had a big fire season and practically all the fires I had were crew action.

FC Project fires.
BY Yeah. The first one was Dollar Creek down on the Boise. Then the next one was Meridian Creek and we tried to jump it... jumped two guys and they hit so hard that they said, "Call it off." So we trucked up to that one and I was disappointed there because that would have been my fiftieth jump. And I did make my fiftieth jump up in Winthrop later... about a week later. And uh, had a two manner [inaudible] up in Winthrop. We jumped at nine o'clock in the morning, were back in camp at noon and we got aced by four guys. [laughs] Which is kind of a bummer. Okay, that was my fiftieth jump and that was significant because you get the little gold button you know. Let's see, in '61 we had a whole bunch of big fires. There was Sage Creek on the Salmon... I took some movies... I started shooting movies that year. I took movies of guys coming in... and I had one of the 32 coming down and one of the 28 coming down right beside him and you could just really see the difference in those chutes. Only we had the Poverty Flat disaster where the Mexicans all got sick from eating ham that they had rat holed out of the kitchen. They took this five gallons of ham that was for breakfast one morning, ate it the next day at noon and it had gone bad. And they all got sick.

FC Where was this?

BY This was on the Payette, it was called the Poverty Flat Fire. It was 900 acres, it was manned, it had 300 Mexicans and you know those Indians on it. But they took this ham out from the kitchen, that set for two days and ate it, and they all got sick.

FC Diarrhea and?

BY Oh man, you talk about a mess. They had to move the fire camp because it was such a mess. [laughs] And all those sleeping bags came in... we just took them out and hosed them off with a fire hose, it was terrible. So anyway they told us [they] were gonna truck us in to south fork and we were going to patrol the fire, and we were all bummed. So Max Allan jumps out and he goes over and grabs the Supervisor by the throat and he says, "Hey look, that fire will be unmanned for two more hours if you don't fly us over there." So they said, "Okay, go jump it." You couldn't believe the difference you know guys thinking their going to be pounding the fire and the guys going out to jump the fire. That was just... really a graphic illustration. Then we got out there and the air was bad. I mean it was terrible.

FC Bumpy?

BY Oh boy. Kenny Roth was flying the Doug and he was having a hard time keeping it up. And he'd have to go down the canyon about ten miles to get altitude enough to get out and make a turn. But anyway I was in... I was near the end of the load and I went up and shot three sticks going out. And I started to get sick so I just hooked up. [laughs] I went out on the next stick, event though it wasn't my turn they were all jumping anyway. And a guy named Woody Spence and I jumped together and we were the
only two that hit the spot. Everybody was scattered from hell to
breakfast because the wind was just coming in gusts. You know
never know what you're going....

FC  Squirrely as hell.

BY  Oh squirrely, I tell ya. And I watched... Woody was heavier
than I and he hit the ground and it looked like a bomb going off.
And I thought oh, oh... bam I hit... Judas Priest. Oh,
another thing happened a couple years before is Roselli dropped
me over on the BLM land right across the Snake down from where
the Brownley Dam is now. And we were just getting the Twin Beech
and this Twin Beech pilot had only dropped just a couple of
couple and he expected us to throw two sets of streamers, you
know, that's what you do in the mountains. You throw one set of
streamers and see where they go then you fly over the streamers,
throw another set and see if they go in the spot and then if
that's OK then you jump. Well, this Beech pilot was flying along
on a streamer run, about 130 knots, we threw streamers, we
watched them go into the 10,000 acres of sagebrush down there and
so we knew what the wind was. Doesn't make any difference where
you go in a place like that so Roselli gets me in the door, the
pilots zipping along at 130 knots and out I go with a flat pack.

FC  Like the old Eagle chute, huh?

BY  Oh... I tell you neighbors, when that thing hit, I saw the
sun the stars, the moon, Jupiter, Saturn, the whole nine yards.
It almost knocked me out. And I remember laying on that rocks
down there under the sagebrush and bruised one foot a little bit
and then we lost the fire and it went to 10,000 acres and it was
a mess. But that was certainly the hardest opening shock I ever
took or ever hope to take.

FC  Well, you didn't tell the pilot to slow her down?

BY  Well he just thought we were going to through more streamers
because we always did. But hell, when there's 10,000 acres of
sagebrush down there, what's the difference where you go. And I
remember Dell Catlin was on that fire with me. Then oh... one of
the best fires of all was in '54 on the 14th of September. And
my jump partner was Merle Cables, my brother-in-law. And we
found out we were going to jump Sheepeter Ridge out in
Chamberlain, and the 15th of September deer and elk season
starts. So Merle ran up to his trailer, grabbed his 30-30, a
little ammunition, and his game sacks and he wrapped up the 30-30
in the game sacks and we suited up and got in the Travelaire and
flew out there. And we threw streamers at it and it was a little
too windy at 3 o'clock in the afternoon so we went into
Chamberlain and landed. And we sat around there... Chamberlain
looked like LaGuardia for all the hunters were out there in their
airplanes. And they were bummed because they saw Merle with his
rifle across his reserve and they knew he was going to get first
shot at them in the morning. So we went up and jumped about 6
o'clock. And we jumped right near Hand Cabin in a kind of lake
basin that dries up. And it was all dry around except for this little puddle out there maybe 40 yards across. So, we jumped right there and then we walked up and some jerk had been casing the joint, looking for game and dropped a cigarette and that started the fire. Right on the edge of the trail. So, we chinked out a line and piled up the stuff to burn up, that we wanted to burn. Then we went down to the cabin, went to bed and we got to sleep in a bed that night. That was great. Next morning, we get up at dawn or before dawn and I go check the fire and Merle was hunting and the fire is only 200 yards away and I hadn't even got there till I heard his gun go off. And he walked out by this lake, and he heard water running and there's no water runs in the lake. But there's an old deer out there taking a leak. So, he watched the deer and when he stepped to shore he blew his brains out. And some kind soul had left a whole sack of onions in the cabin. So, we had lots of onions and guess what we ate for lunch.

FC Liver and onions.

BY You got that right. Then the next morning we woke up and Merle looked out the door and there was a little spike coming right up the trail. And he stuck the gun right out the door of the cabin and shot that spike right between the eyes. And about noon, Mike Jensen from Chamberlain, came up with a couple of work horses with pack saddles on them. And we put deer on one horse and fire packs on the other one. And then we walked 17 miles back to Chamberlain. About 8 that night the Ford came in and we threw the big deer, tagged, on the Ford and out we went to McCall. Old Merle got his deer hunting in and got paid for it. And I got to eat liver and onions. OK. Let's go on up into the '70's. Here's a story that's really neat because I became a squad leader in '64 and that was a terrible fire year and then '65 was a bad fire year and '66 was a good one. But anyway, I'm now squad leader and in '66 there's one fire that I think is really significant.

FC Oh, let me interrupt you a minute Bill. Our vocabulary is a little different than those that might listen to this tape, ie. good and bad fire years. Can you elaborate on good and bad fire years.

BY A good fire year, you get lots of fire jumps. A bad fire year you don't get many.

FC OK. Go ahead.

BY OK. In '66 the first fire jump I had was on Troy Peak in Nevada. They took 16 of us from McCall and we had just finished our refresher training. And we even had some Idaho City guys with us because they were at McCall in refresher training with us. But anyway, we went down to Troy Peak, which is south of Ely, and I think this is a record. We hit the ground on this jump at 11,000 feet. And I can substantiate this because there is a Kybabs Formation that makes the tops of those mountains. And
up at the top, the very top, we climbed up there just to look around after we got the fire knocked out and found a geological bench mark. And it said 11,350 feet.

FC Did you hit pretty hard?

BY I tell you neighbor, we hit hard. But I remember Yurgi and a guy named Kennedy got tangled up. They got tangled up in each other's lines and they landed real hard and they rolled down the hill about 200 yards. But anyway, that was a significant fire because we were jumping for bristlecone pine, which is a rare tree and they're trying to save it all. But 11,000 feet, I think is a record for height.

FC How come they got tangled up? Too close?

BY Who knows? Just one of those things. In '65 I jumped with a ned on Rabbit Creek up on the Payette, right on the Salmon River where it's steep as all get out. And this stupid ned drives right into me. He just wasn't looking and he drove right into me. And his feet came right through my lines, right above my head so I reached up and grabbed his feet, I said, "turn right!" So, he turned right and as soon as his chute got out there a ways I put his feet out and got rid of him. But hey, we'd have been in trouble, tangled up going into that Salmon River canyon. Oh, let's see. Oh, now I want to get the Lost Packer disaster in '66. And this is probably one of my hairiest jumps of all. We have a glaciated...

FC Where's Lost Packer?

BY It's on the Salmon. And it's right near where we walked out on that Square Top thing, when I was a Ned. But anyway there was a glaciated canyon that must be 3000 feet deep. The fire was on a little ledge maybe 20 yards wide down in the canyon, oh, 500 feet from the top. And there's no place to jump near the fire except the very top of the mountain, which was a very good jump spot. So, we dropped streamers and they blew from the canyon to the mountain top. So, they spotted us on what they read the streamers by, but in the meantime while we're going around, hooking up, the wind changed and did a 180. So, now it's blowing the other way. And we get out over the canyon and head for the spot immediately and we're losing ground going back into the canyon. Hey, I was scared to death. I looked down there and here's this glaciated no place to land canyon, you know, and just rocks. And I thought Oh boy, just kiss your ass goodbye because it's all over now. And I remember watching the top of the mountain go by and just being committed into the canyon. I thought, "Oh, I've had it." So, I looked frantically for something to land on and looked down there and saw three little trees and I did the greatest job of chute handling of my life. And I nailed one of those trees. I came into it and my arms and legs spread eagled and I wrapped them around just like Smokey Bear, around the tree. I said catch me you sweet son of a bitch and I just wrapped up on that thing. And my jump partner Al
Stillman landed on a rock and he was light, he only weighed 130 pounds. He landed on a rock standing up, we were jumping 5-As that let you down pretty soft and he fell forward and hung on. If he'd fell backwards, he would have been 200 feet into boulders and then a thousand feet, you know just... it would have been all over for him. So, needless to say, they didn't drop anybody else there. They dropped the rest of them clear down at the very bottom of the U-shaped canyon. There was a little fire drove clear down there and they had to get it anyway. And that was one of the worst deals I ever got on.

FC How far were you from the fire?

BY Uh, I was only 50 yards from it were I landed. We were planning on jumping the top and then hiking down there. But we got blown down there. Let's see, I got a real neat story from 1970. I'd spent a lot of time in LaGrande that year and I was one of the few spotters they had over there. So, I did a lot of spotting that year. And it finally come up to my turn to jump and they finally got one guy in who could spot, but he was a brand new spotter, he had only done it a couple of times, a guy named Tabler. And so we get out to this fire on Mahogany Creek and we're in the Twin Beech that has the little door in the bottom that you open up and you look at it and your... the spotter is ahead of the jumper and he can't see the jumper. So, when we got the streamers read I told Dave, I says, "Hey, you just line it up, I'm going to get out when I want to." And he didn't say anything because I think he was in awe of me because I was the old timer at that. And so anyway, we lined... he lined it up, did good, we're just trucking right over it and I got to where I wanted to get out so I just left. And Duke Norsely was a Ned then and he was the next guy to go, and he said about three seconds after I'd left the airplane, Tabler gets up and takes a big swat and there's nobody there. And so he grabbed Duke by the throat and bounced him off the side of the plane and says, "Don't you dare jump 'til I swat you." And Duke says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." But Duke had stuck his head out and saw where I got out. So, when we came by again he... Duke got in the door and when he got to where I got out, he got out. And we can just imagine what Tabler did when he took a swat at us and Duke and I landed in a nice grassy little area and these two guys that he spotted, for real, landed up in the rimrock. It was a wonder they didn't get hurt. Oh, let's see... another hairy jump that I had was, oh about '72, I jumped in Disappointment Creek.

FC Where's that?

BY This is in some of the roughest country in Idaho. When Lewis and Clark made their trip down the Salmon River, they got down to the mouth of Disappointment Creek and said, "This is too tough for us," and turned around and went back. This is good country. There's Dismal Creek, Starvation Creek, Hungry Creek and Disappointment Creek. But anyway, the...

FC Salmon Forest?
BY What?

FC Salmon Forest?

BY No. It's on the Payette. It's right at the... where the mouth of Chamberlain Creek runs in. Grass Mountain Lookout is pretty near to there. But anyway, it's just straight up and down canyons. I mean, they're so steep you stand there and you can't straighten your arm out before you hit the ground ahead of you, just straight up and down. And all covered with yellow pine. And so anyway, Satterwaite was spotting us and the drift was going right down the ridge top. So, he spotted us on that assumption and of course the squirrely wind got us and blew us out over that canyon. Well, I looked down that canyon, I knew how steep it was and I figured, oh man, I don't want to climb out of that thing. So, I did what you call a slip. I took three lines on the front of my parachute and just ran up them like a monkey. And I got a hold of the skirt with one hand, held the lines in a loop of my finger and thumb, with the other hand, and just dumped all the air out of my chute and I went down in 10 seconds. And when I got down to about 200 feet I let go of the skirt, popped her open again and I snuck through the trees and even got on the ground. I was amazed at that. And I hollered to my jump partner, who was out over the canyon farther, and he saw me slip and so then he slipped and he got down quicker. But I still didn't see him for two hours. I had the fire almost out before he got there. And he was just totally out of gas because he had to climb up two thirds of that canyon, where I only had to climb up about an eighth of it. So, that was a wild one. Oh, let's see, I should tell one story about... before we had the fitness test, people could get into smokejumping and not really be that good a man.

FC You talking about '53 now?

BY Now we're going back to about '64. We had a guy named Maloney that went through in '64 and he couldn't jump the hurdles, he couldn't climb over the wall, he couldn't do a chin up, he couldn't do hardly anything.

FC How come he didn't get washed out?

BY That's a good question. But he tried so hard you know, and he was such a nice guy, they just didn't have the heart to fire him, I guess. So, '64 was a crummy year. We only got one fire jump apiece. And Maloney got through it. He jumped out in the sagebrush some place, made his fire jump and became a smokejumper. And then the next year he comes back an experienced jumper. Hah, hah! And I get him for a jump out in Wapiti Creek which is not very far from Disappointment Creek. And we made a timber jump. I managed to sneak through the trees and get on the ground but he treed up. Then we had to saw a big yellow pine down. And he was so weak he couldn't pull the saw back, I had to push it. We got the tree down. He did throw a little dirt on
the one branch that was burning and then we ate. I says, "OK Maloney, go get your chute." He says, "Bill, I can't climb," and I said, "Come on you went through training," he says, "Yeah, but I never did climb," I said, "You better climb now because that's your chute sucker." So, he starts up the tree and he gets up about three steps, misses a spur and runs a stob right into his groin. And I mean he laid there on the ground and rolled around in agony for awhile. And so finally he came back to life and I says, "Try her again." This time he only got two steps before he missed a spur. I said, "Take those things off before you kill yourself." So, I had to go up and get his chute down. And then they dropped us a note from the copter saying, "Be in the meadow two miles down the ridge, in an hour." Well shit, when you got to carry a pack two miles through the brush in an hour, you better get moving. So, I took the climbers, the crosscut, the cargo chute, I think I even took his pulaski, you know, because I knew he was weak and put all that stuff in my pack and I took off and I got about a hundred yards down the trail and I turned around and he's only gone ten yards. And I says, "Come on Maloney, we got to get down there. That copters going to be there," and he says, "I'm coming as fast as I can," and so I says, "Just follow my tracks." And so I thrashed down there and got down to the meadow and here's a whole bunch of little trees that would have caught a tail rotor. So, I had to go out and chop down about 50 trees with a pulaski. And just about the time the copter came in, here comes Maloney, just staggering. I mean he was totally gone. But he did get down there and he didn't get hurt.

FC Did they (inaudible) after that?

BY No. But I'll tell you, I was bummed. Because if I'd have got hurt, it'd have been all over because he couldn't have even got out of there. So...

FC Yeah. Well why keep him on anymore?

BY I know. Well he only lasted that year. That wasn't a real good year either. But that really bummed me. And since then, well the next year they put in the fitness test. And since then we've had a far better quality of men in the jumpers. And the years go by and last year was the first year I ever lost any gear...

FC Tell me about that.

BY Clark Noble and Munt and Acosta and Dunlap and I and Hansen jumped over on the west side, on the sagebrush situation. And there were just probably a hundred yards of smokes at the bottom...

FC Again, which forest?

BY This is on the Payette, down near Brownley Dam, and it didn't look like it was going to be much work at all. So, we
just left our chutes lay in the sagebrush and ran over and got some tools out of the cargo chutes, ran over to fight the fire.

FC Flat country?

BY No. It's rolling and it just kind of undulates and then there's a pretty steep face that had burned and then this was right at the base of it. It wasn't so steep, you couldn't walk up it. But it was fairly steep. So anyway, we get over there and we start fighting it and then a big thunder cloud comes by and of course they stir up winds of all kinds and directions and this fanned the fire and got away from us and it blew it out in the sagebrush and then it blew it towards our gear. So, three of us ran over there to get the gear. Hansen and Acosta and I, and we got to the gear just about the same time the fire got to the gear. And we stood there about 40 yards from our gear and watched it... brand new pair of shoes burn up. And we were wondering what the heck to do because the fire was coming right at us and so we were digging in our packs to get out some matches and we are going to light fires at our feet and then just walk up behind the flames and stay behind it. But about that time the wind changed and gave us an out, so we just ran around it and got out of there. But that's the only time in all those years the I ever had gear burned.

FC Did you lose any more than the chutes?

BY We lost our chutes and our jumpsuits...

FC P-G...

BY No. We carried our P-G bags with us. You never leave them. I carried a camera and a little pair of binoculars and cribbage board and down vest and all that kind of stuff.

Oh, being a spotter and cargo dropper... probably the hairiest cargo dropping I ever did was once about 1970, I went down to Idaho Falls and we hauled three Doug loads from Idaho Falls up towards Driggs and the air was as bad as I've ever seen. And the first run over the mountain, we were expecting to hit up air and we hit down air and the 146 Zulu, the Doug, took off... topped two pine trees. We had one on each wing that we took a little pine needles off of there. And it was so bad that... I remember I lost my lunch while we were in route. I missed one bundle, I threw up. And Dale Maskeson, Buck Carter were with me on that one. And then we got back to Idaho Falls and they took us from there down to Salt Lake City because the airplane hadn't gone in for 100 hour. And so we got a free trip to Salt Lake out of that cargo run and they sent us back to McCall the next day in a twin engined something or other. That seems kind of silly to me to...

FC How about wildlife? Bear and cougar and...

BY Oh, this one I got to tell. I jumped a two manner with Spence Miller in '54 over on the Snake River, over in Hells
Canyon area, and when we were coming out of there, we were carrying our packs, the E bags up a hill and they weighed a 100 pounds and we're struggling up this hill. And Spence gets up next to a big yellow pine and he jumped four feet in the air, pack and all, and sprinted up the hill 100 yards in less time than it takes me to tell you...

FC Rattlesnake?

BY No. No. He came face-to-face with a mamma cougar and she spit at him. When you get spit at by a cougar, you've been spit at. When I got over my shock of watching what happened to him, he turned around and says, "There's a cougar down there," and there went the cougar and her cubs around the hill. They were just sauntering off. Then another time, we jumped in that same country and we had to jump way up in the trees, way up high because down in the canyon it was so damned rough with the rocks and bluffs and things that we decided to jump way up there. We're tippy toeing down through the rocks and I got down to this one place and here's a big old rock, must of weighed 100 pounds, sitting right on the edge, so I had to roll it. So, I gave the rock a boot and it goes zooooo! down and down and down and down and then it goes ripping into a willow thicket, I mean going 100 miles an hour. Rock went in, bear came out. That was just instant. The rock came in, the bear come out, just like that. Then he ran along side of the thing for a little ways and then ran back into the willow thicket.

Then I jumped a fire on Beaver Creek once and we had a yearling bear that was out there in the huckleberries around us for two days. We didn't want a chainsaw because we had to pack out and consequently we had a crosscut and we had an acre of downed stuff to cut up and we just worked and worked and worked. But this bear was out there eating huckleberries all that time. And I bet he wasn't more than 50 yards from us all the time. Just lapping them up with his tongue.

Oh let's see. Oh once I found a dead bear out in the woods and I got his claws and I saw those big eye teeth on that bear and I thought, "I gotta have those." So, I took my pulaski and chopped the bears teeth out of his skull. I didn't want to take the whole skull. And when I got back I looked at my pulaski and I might as well of been chopping on a railroad rail because it just destroyed that poor pulaski. They really have hard bones.

FC How about some of the characters you've known.

BY Here's one of the most class... well here's one I got to get on tape. This is a poem written by Ed Guy, who jumped in McCall from... all through the 50's and into the 60's. And this is called the "Ode to a Pulaski".

Oh pulaski, oh pulaski, your bright shining blade glints in the sun while we sit in the shade.

Oh pulaski, oh pulaski, the smokejumper's friend, stuck in a log while he sits on his end.
Oh pulaski, oh pulaski the multiple tool, no one could love you but an idiot fool. –

[END OF INTERVIEW]