The following transcript is a scan of the original and has not been edited. For additional assistance, please contact Archives and Special Collections.
KT Can you give us a brief biographical sketch?

WB Well, let's see I kind of grew up in Hamilton, Montana. I graduated from high school in Hamilton, Montana. I went to school at the... Montana State over in Bozeman for about three years and I spent a little time in the service. I spent a few summers working for the Forest Service, both as a smoke jumper and as a ground pounder. Um, I lived in Missoula most of my life. I've been involved in several types of businesses here and mostly related to sales and I'm currently involved in a sales job. Pretty brief, but that's about it.

KT And how did you become interested in smokejumping?

WB When I was about fifteen years old, it was during the World War II, and there was a real man shortage and I just lied about my age and went to work for the Forest Service on the West Fork of the Bitterroot on a brush piling crew. It was a good job and good pay and kind of interesting. We did a lot of smoke chasing and fire fighting and trail work and brush piling and I found that I kind of liked it. I went... after that summer I think I went two summers in the Moose Creek area over at the Selway lookout and trail crew. And I was thought it was an awful lot of work to have to walk fifteen or twenty miles to a fire and you see these guys come bouncing out of sky in parachutes and you'd say gee, that would be an easy way to get to a fire. It never occurred to me that maybe you could find something to do besides fight fire. So, ah and I had some friends, Johnny Sizick, Dick Carpenter, LLoyd Brown, Steve Henau, a lot of the guys that I knew that I worked with had gone into it and I just followed naturally that you'd want to try it. And that's how I came to become a smoke jumper.

KT So, how did your training go as a smoke jumper?

WB It was, my training took place at the old Nine Mile camp out there west of town [Missoula]. And that was a lot of fun, we had, we had a ball with that. I remember that when we'd get off work, why it's about a three or four mile walk down to the Nine Mile House for beer. We had a few characters around, I'll only risk naming one, Al Casari. There were a number of... it was a lot of fun...the jumping was fun. Nobody seemed to be too apprehensive about it. But I think the thing I enjoyed the most of all was the guys and the attitude of the guys and the fun we had in relation to some of the wild times, some of the good times, the hard work, but training was a kick in the head. I remember Bill Woods was the training supervisor at that time. One-eyed Smitty was the loft foreman. At that time I think we were known as "Cooley's Cooleys". It was a lot of fun, it was one of the highlights, smoke jumping is one of the highlights. It was a real fun job for me and the training was great, we all felt pretty proud of ourselves.
KT  Oh, you mentioned that the attitude the smokejumpers had, can you tell us a little bit about the attitude?

WB  Kind of feel pretty good about yourself for doing a pretty interesting job. We thought it was kind of glamorous and we played it up a little bit, you know. But... also mostly in relation to work, pretty professional. We had a lot of pride in what we were doing and we were good at our job. We kind of liked the idea of being a select few. There weren't too many smokejumpers then, maybe a 150 and you were one of them and that attitude kind of prevailed through the whole organization at that time. We were proud of our work, you could rely on the people you were with pretty much to do their job. And it was a lot of fun. You know... good stories to tell the girls, and really worked well...you know... kind of glamorous. So most of the guys, almost without exception, you wouldn't mind being paired up with somebody to go on a fire. You knew he'd carry his share of the load, if you did get in trouble you'd have some backing and that attitude sort of prevailed through the whole thing from the top down. We thought we were pretty good, as a matter of fact we were. It was fun... as I say, it was one of the highlights when I think back on the things I've done in my life, it was one of the things that I really enjoyed the most. And the guys and the people and the sense of accomplishment, you know, and about being a little bit different, really unique.

KT  What did your training entail?

WB  Oh... well the training as far as, it was primarily designed I think for jumping and some physical fitness and some training in equipment and... learning body position, all very basic. Mostly emphasis on the physical and probably mental attitude to get you keyed up to the things that you might expect. Like the jump out of the towers and you'd do a lot of running and you'd practice letdowns and so on and so forth. But... I don't think it was particularly what you might say physically rigorous. At that time you had to pass a pretty good physical and you had to be in pretty good shape. But I was young and I was kind of athletic and I spent a lot of summers working back in places like Moose Creek and generally just fit. Anybody that was pretty well fit wouldn't have too much trouble with it. But if they weren't well fit maybe they shouldn't be jumping. As far as the physical aspects of it, it was... there was some talk of rigging, but we had riggers, nobody... you didn't necessarily have to become a rigger to be a jumper. Ah, there were classes on woodsmanship and map reading and fire fighting and tool safety and safety in the airplane and safety on your equipment and that sort of thing. And then of course the physical aspects of learning what it's like before you actually go up and jump. My feeling was that, incidentally after I smokejumped, I was in the Army as a paratrooper for a couple of years, and I would say that the individual attention that you get in the Forest Service as a smokejumper in those days is much better qualification for jumping. I'd say that what they give you in the Army if you got in trouble on your first jump, you'd probably be in real trouble
because the quality of training. The things you can expect, the emergency procedures and that sort of thing...

KT Can you describe your first training jump for us?

WB Well, it was that little airstrip right on the other side of... just over the hill from the camp there at Nine Mile. I don't know whether the airstrip is still there or not. I know the camp isn't. And they brought a Ford trimotor in from Missoula and Bill Carver who is from my home town was the spotter. And... it was a nice cool, kind of cloudy day, and very calm. Nice big open field next to that airstrip there and the Ford came in and we got in the plane... We were ready for it, it wasn't a question of being totally scared or apprehensive or anything. We'd had the training, we all wanted to do it and it was kind of fun. I remember I was, I had my foot in the door and I was kneeling in the door and I was waiting for 'em to bring me around and carve a little spot in the plane and he turned around and said, "Watch that first step, Bill, it's a bitch" [laughs]. Of course, like I say Bill Carver is an old friend of mine, he was from my home town and ah, I made the jump. Bill Woods was down there with a megaphone telling them turn to the left, turn to the right, put your feet together and so on and so forth. It was... beats any carnival ride I ever had. It was very enjoyable and quite exciting. But again, pretty well prepared for it. You knew what was going to happen and the people in charge of the training... and the guys in the airplane that were taking care of the new jumpers just give you the feeling that you are dealing with a bunch of professionals. They knew what they were doing and they taught you well and you were well prepared for it and it really wasn't any sweat. The first one wasn't bad at all, it was something that I anticipated with a lot of pleasure and it didn't disappoint me.

KT What did your fire fighting training entail?

WB Well, actually fire fighting training wasn't too much a part of it. In those days, I think that in order to be a smokejumper you had to have fire fighting experience. Oh, we'd go out and set a little practice burn and practice digging fireline and this and that and the other. It was mostly to keep you busy and keep you, you know... physically fit when we didn't have projects or stuff like that. But I remember that what they used to say unofficially is we can teach anybody to jump, what we need are experienced fire fighters. Because after all, that's our job. And so I spent three seasons with the Forest Service as a ground pounder and I think it was '45,'46, '47, I don't know. A couple of real hot fire years where they were more concerned when they hired you whether if you were physically fit and if you could take care of yourself in the woods, and if you knew about fire fighting, if you'd had actual experience. So we didn't really devote a lot of time to fire fighting. Map reading, how to find your way out of the Middle Fork of the Shaman River, if you didn't know for sure where you were if you went on a dawn patrol, you know, those things were emphasized. Map reading and that sort
of thing, but fire fighting, you were supposed to know that. At least that's the impression I got. And of all the applicants and the guys that I worked with at that time all had fire fighting experience. I don't think they would be hired if they hadn't had. They wanted people that knew how to get along in the woods on their own, how to take care of themselves in that type of situation and were experienced in fire fighting. At least that was my, I don't recall any extensive fire fighting training as such and for most of the people that I can recall it wasn't really necessary at all. They had some experience in one way or another.

KT Can you remember your first fire jump?

WB No, can you believe that? Let me think for a minute... boy, the first year I jumped was a... I suppose from the Forest Service standpoint, a good fire year, but from our standpoint, a poor fire year because there was nothing exceptional about it. There weren't too many fires, I think I only got two or three fire jumps that year. And of course they were the ideal kind, up in the mountain meadow with a little smoke coming out and two guys jump and you put the fire out real easy and that sort of thing. Ah... I honestly can't... my first jump, my first fire jump was in 1950 and that's a couple years ago. I cannot say that my first fire jump was really something that was impressive. My last fire jump was impressive. We referred to it as "The Spastic Chasm Fire." Now you're going to hear a silk story [laughs] This is after I got out of the Army and... I think it was the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Boy it was steep and hot in there and a whole bunch of guys from McCall had jumped in there. They'd sent two Ford Tri-motor loads in there and they all got busted up. And they were out of jumpers so they called and the fire was going on pretty good. And these guys were hurt and they didn't use good judgment, maybe I shouldn't tell this story, and they called us out of Missoula and we sent a Doug load over, sixteen guys. And we looked for a spot, of course, we wouldn't jump there, makes good sense with sixteen guys coming. But about a mile up the ridge there was an open snag patch... and also my first experience with a helicopter, which is kind of interesting. So we jumped up in that snag patch and figured we could walk that mile down to the fire and where the guys that were hurt were. So we jumped into that snag patch and all sixteen of us got in there as smooth as could be and they sent another sixteen guys out of Missoula and they jumped in the same place we did. And we all got in there just as smooth as can be and then there was kind of a... this area was steep, ya know, steep and dry and hot. And we got a lot of guys that were hurt, laying around out there. So the first thing they decided to bring a helicopter. I think the guy flying it was Hughes, but I'm not sure, and this is pretty high country. So they come in with a helicopter and what we did is we cleared some trees off of this sharp pointed finger that came off of this ridge we were on. And it was just enough area for the runners and then it dropped off steeply on both sides. We cut some trees down so that he'd have some sort of an approach and a take off point. And it was quite steep, you know, like forty-five degree
angle, off that ridge. We put some markers out and he brought this copter in and the runners just about fit in the area that we, you know landing runners that we... the area that we flattened off the top of this little finger. He brought that thing in there and we put one guy in the seat and one guy in the stretcher and that's all he could carry because it was high up. And he'd rev her up and would have to drop down in that canyon and fly out that canyon down to I think McCall's, McCall Bar, to put the injured on ... an airplane that came in to take 'em to McCall or wherever they were taking 'em. But we got all the injured people out and we went to work on the fire. It was just a dirty one, ya know, it was steep and hot and the trees would fall down and come skidding down the mountain. You'd get a line around it and it would fall and scatter fire 200 yards down the hill, you know, and it was a tough fire. I think about the third day, and we were really back in the boondocks, I mean it's a long ways from anywhere. I think about the third day the ground crew got in and we did have the fire more or less under control at that time. Then they flew us out in the helicopter, we didn't have to walk that, I don't know, 25 miles down to McCall Bar to fly back to Missoula. That was exciting, it was kind of a tough fire. I think maybe I was getting older then, too.

KT How did the guys get injured on that fire?

WB It was a poor jump spot! I couldn't believe that they would jump there. Maybe I shouldn't be saying this, I don't know, but I thought it was poor judgment. Now, not only that, you got eight guys laying down there, ought to tell you something about it's not a good spot. They bring eight more guys to do the same thing, hmm? Somebody wasn't thinking, huh? And a mile up, maybe three quarters of a mile up the ridge, a nice open snag patch. Sure there were snags there but there was plenty of room to get around 'em. I just couldn't understand it. I think Fred Barnowski was our foreman on that fire and he's the one that thought it was kind of stupid to jump there too [laughs]. There used to be a little rivalry between McCall and Missoula jumpers. They seemed to be more interested in the number of jumps they could make and how gung-ho they could be and I think we were concerned about how much overtime we could make so that we'd have enough money for school, ya know. But there I just covered my whole career. I can't remember my first jump but I can remember my last one, [laughs], huh!

KT Do you remember any specific characters on your crews?

WB Oh God, there were so many of 'em. Max and Normal from Powder River country, a couple of cowboys that were just dingier. Al Casari used to go into the Sunshine Bar on his hands, mind you. The Sunshine Bar was in Skid Row, it doesn't exist anymore. We'd be sittin' in there drinking, the doors would open and here'd come Casari, off walking in on his hands and walk up to the bar and get a beer with his feet, kind of interesting. He's also a, [laughs] they had the crew at Fort Missoula and we were on standby. He's also the guy that came in a little bit smashed
and took a dive into the swimming pool and there weren't no water in the swimming pool. Danny [inaudible] was another character I remember. There is a bunch of 'em, God, there's a lot of 'em. Dick Carpenter, that could walk and work for four days straight, then come to town and get in a fight, then go back out on a fire, [laughs]. Who else? Oh, there's so many of 'em, I can't remember, I can't say that there were any, there were a few that were a little outstanding, but they were primarily a bunch of characters, most of those guys.

KT What kind of project work did you do?

WB Well, let's see, we put a fence in around the airport at Libby, that was one project I was on. Fencing, up to Libby, Libby, Montana. It was kind of interesting, one of the attorneys here in town... seems to remember the year the jumpers were there and he's an attorney now and his father was the ranger there. It's a very unusual name and I got to talking to him one time and I told him well, I worked for your dad on a project. They still talked about you guys up there, I don't know if that's good or bad? Let's see, what else did we do on projects. What other project was I involved in? I worked back in my own district one time and I think we worked, I think we were repairing some bridges back in Moose Creek, is one of the projects we went on and trail maintenance and that sort of thing. They just used us all over. Most of the time, well, the Libby project I remember because that was the year it was a poor fire year and they kept us out for quite a while, a good fire year, excuse me. But those were the projects. I went to New Mexico one year on, you know they used to send an eight man crew down to Demming. Let's see, I went with Fred, Fred was our squad leader. I got that job in a kind of peculiar way. It was my second year of jumping. I had been in school and I ran plum out of money and I mean plum out of money, and I hitch hiked to Missoula. I was going home to Hamilton to see if I could find a job. It might a been in May sometime, I'm not sure, but it was the beginning of spring quarter and I just didn't have enough money to go to school. And I stopped in the Old Turf and Fred Bernoski was in there, I was having a hamburger, and he said, "What are you doing?" I said I'm looking for a job, Fred. He says, "Do you want to go to New Mexico?" I said, "Hell yes, I want to go to New Mexico". So he says, "Well...", it was on a Thursday night, I remember that and I had just gotten into Missoula. And he said, "Get in the pickup and we'll go out to Nine Mile". So I went out to Nine Mile Friday morning, I took my two refresher jumps and the reason they had a vacancy is they were going to leave the following Monday. One of the guys that was going on the crew, they had an eight man crew, had been injured and they didn't have a readily available replacement and boy, I needed a job and you talk about good timing, you know. So, Fred took me out to Nine Mile and the next morning I made a couple of refresher jumps and there was a fellow there by the name of Lloyd Brown who was from my home town and he said, well, I'm going I had borrowed his boots to make my jump, my two jumps, and he said he was going home. So I got in the car with him and he gave me a ride home and I got my gear and
we came back. Monday morning we took off for New Mexico. Really
kind of lucky, except that I dropped out of school because I
didn't have any money and I didn't notify my draft board and I
got drafted. The Forest Service got me deferred through the New
Mexico season and we'd get back here about the middle of July and
I think they kept me out till about the middle of September and
then I had to go. So, it was that rush, I kind of forgot to go
tell the draft board because I could have said, "amount of money,
you know, but I'm going back to school next fall and I got a job
lined up for the summer, the smokejumping". I could have probably
beat the rap, but it didn't work that way.

KT Were there any differences between the Nine Mile crew and
the New Mexico crew?

WB Oh... the guys, the New Mexico crew guys were just Nine Mile
crew, I mean they were all the same. No, there was no big
difference, it was all part of the organization. They never sent
anybody to New Mexico, usually they would only send third or
fourth year men to New Mexico. They wanted more experienced guys,
but as find as the Nine Mile crew was concerned, the Nine Mile
was just a training base at that time. I think everybody used to
going through training, that's where they took their training. When
I came back from the Army was the first year they opened this
new, and smokejumped my last year was the first year that opened
up this new loft that's out here at the airport now [Missoula].
Before that we used to jump out of old Hale field now where the
high school is out on South Avenue and sleep in the horse barns.
But I think all the guys just, it was no difference. Nine Mile
crew, that doesn't, same, all the same people, Nine Mile was just
a phase of it, I think.

KT Was the work the same in New Mexico?

WB No, that was a little different. That country down there is
hot and dry and you get on a fire and you either get it out and
under control real quick or you forget about it. I jumped out on
a night fire with a guy by the name of Francis Anowash, this is
in New Mexico, Lloyd Brown, and Mickey Burke and when we jumped
on there it was about an acre and when it ran us out of the
country it was about sixty thousand acres and going strong. It
was a big, big fire. Down there they just burn hot and fast.
It's real dry and the duff is real thick and real dry. It's a
little easier digging fire line, you can dig a lot of fire line a
lot faster. But you gotta do it fast because if you don't get 'em
under control, they just really go on you. It's real dry. And
the jumping is a little tougher cause it's dry, you come in a lot
harder.

KT Are there any other jumps in New Mexico that you can
remember?

WB Oh, we had... usually if you went to New Mexico you were
going to get some jumps because it, they used, they had the, what
they call the Gila National Forest which I think is a primitive
area. Hard access and down there when you get a fire you got to get on it, like I say or they're gone. So you, quite a bit of activity. I can't think of any particular fire that I was on except the night fire, that was outstanding. I'm sure it was outstanding as far as the Forest Service was concerned, too. But... I can't think of any particular fire that really stands out in my mind. The big project fire was the one that got away from us, so to speak, was interesting in that we had, gosh they had, I don't know, thousands and thousands, I don't remember numbers, of guys on the fire line. And between going out on other fire calls we spent an awful lot of time dropping cargo to the fire crews up there. We did just an awful lot of that and... it was pretty good for overtime. We'd load the stuff up at night, cargo it up, and tie the chutes on it and then get an early morning run or two. And we'd sleep a little bit in the middle of the day cuz it was so hot and you didn't want to do any low altitude flying in that kind of weather. And then you'd get a few cargo, maybe one or two cargo runs in the evening to keep the fire camp supplied. Gosh, we had great big Army planes that would come up from the regional warehouses in Seattle with equipment. Great big C-124's and we'd unload 'em and brake it all down and put it into more manageable packages. And we had an audience, all the people from El Paso and around thought it was pretty exciting. If you were lucky, we had a Noorduyn, was our airplane that we were using for jumping and if you got a fire call, well we'd have Red Schultz bring the airplane right out in front of all these people and then we would make it a point to put our jump gear on in front of the prettiest girl we could spot and play the role, ya know, it was beautiful. An opportunity to play the role like you've never seen, and we did her right up to the limit [laughs]. I'm probably gonna get in trouble for telling that [laughs], but we had a lot of fun with that one, ya know. There was some pretty good play acting going on there. That was a pretty good, that New Mexico was a pretty good experience. It was a small crew, there were only eight of us and we had our airplane and our pilot and we were way off away from everybody. When the phone would ring, we'd have a fire and we'd take care of it and it was a pretty good experience, a lot of fun.

KT You mentioned that you got drafted after you were working in New Mexico and you came back to be a smokejumper later and did you recognize any differences?

WB Well, of course when I came back the new, the new Depot out here [Missoula] was open and that was, that was pretty, used to be a pretty casual outfit, I mean professional and take care of your work and that sort of thing, but you know, pretty casual. And I noticed a few guys wearing shirts with Forest Service patches and that sort of thing and... oh, we used to wear little red felt hats that you buy for a dollar and a quarter and they started saying that you gotta wear a hard hats. It was a little different, a little more structured is the thing that I noticed when I came back after being gone for what--two summers. A little more structured, a little more formal, a few more forms to fill out, ya know, and maybe a little more rules and regulations
and more attention to detail. And in my opinion more attention to
detail and maybe not as much to get the job done. And that could
be wrong. That could be an attitude I had because I'd been in the
Army for two years and I didn't like any kind of structure too
well. But it was different.

KT Did it seem to affect the attitude of the crews at all?

WB [Pauses] I can't, I'm not sure that I can answer that. I'm
not sure that I was paying that much attention. It felt
different, the whole thing felt different. But there is a couple
factors, like maybe I was more mature, huh? So I can't say that I
can make any accurate observations about that.

KT What were some of your off duty activities?

WB You mean, [laughs], well, my goodness. Well, you know, the
usual thing that young men do, drinking and carousing and... I'd
like to say that I studied a lot or whatever, but that would be
untrue. It was kind of a fun time and ... single and no
responsibilities to anyone but yourself and pretty carefree....
we do the usual things that young men... footloose and fancy free
do or try to do. I can't think of anything really constructive
that I would say I did in my off time, I'm sorry.

KT What were some of the favorite bars around town?

WB Oh, the Flame used to be headquarters and Merle's... at this
time the Sunshine Bar and some of the skid row places we used to
go to were on the downhill side and nobody fooled with 'em too
much. But I'd say Merle's and the Flame were more or less
headquarters. There was Hugh, the Arab, that was the bartender
there and Merle's... drank beer, chase girls, ya know, that sort
of thing. Catch some sometimes... but the usual, you know, guys
get together and shoot a little pool, drink a little beer, b.s..
If you were a little hard up for money maybe you didn't do that.
You'd just stay out at the loft and hope for a fire call. Sit
around and hope you could get some time in because somebody had
skipped their, wouldn't be available for their turn on the jump
list then you would get to go. I used to do a little of that, but
if I had but we're talking about off time, off time you go down
and you run around with the guys and chase girls and drink beer,
ya know. That was about what it amounted to.

KT What were some of the favorite bars around town?

WB Well, we had Travelaires, we had Ford Tri-motors, we had the
Twin Beech, we had a DC-2, and of course we had DC-3's, and the
C-47's, and we had that Noorduyan that we used to take to New
Mexico. That was a kind of neat ol', big old radial engine job.
That was a kind of a neat airplane. Of course, the Travelaires
were super, they 're just like a big motorized kite, and the Ford
Tri-motors were good, too. Nice airplanes to jump out of, they
slow way down. The Ford was a little tricky, it had a little tiny
cup step and a low door and if you were second or third man it
was kind of hard, ya know, you'd have to kind of lead the step
cuz the wind, the slip stream would catch you and catch that and
then duck way down and stand up. Some people had a way around
that, but it was frowned on and that was to dive out the door
head first if you were second or third. That was not accepted
procedure, considered not safe, although I didn't believe that
was a factor. Good body position they told us was essential to a
good opening which is basically true. I liked the Ford Tri-
motors, they were kind of unique and the Travelaires were a nice
airplane. I suppose really the easiest ones to jump out of were
the C-47's, great big door, you'd just step right out. So they
were pretty easy. The Noorduyn you'd kind of have to sit in the
step to get out and you'd have to sit with both feet in the
step. Then the second guy out would have to kind of do some quick
stepping to get out. The Travelaires, most of the jumpers wanted
to pass on that one although it was a sweetheart of an airplane.
They could just make that thing stand still and let you out. It
was real slow flying, if they wanted it to fly slow, it was a
real slow flying airplane and just a sweetheart to jump out of.
I think that, you know, I don't I... we had Twin Beechs, I don't
think I ever jumped one. I was waiting to make a refresher jump
in one and it came in, this is at the new place, the airplane
came in and all the landing gear didn't lock down and it just
kind of folded up and the airplane went skidding off across the
runway, so I think... I think they jumped us out of a C-47. They
were just taking a bunch of guys for a refresher jumps, we were
jumping up Sherman Creek, I think it was, at upper Sherman. And
they were jumping quite a few guys that morning and the airplanes
would just go up and dump a load and come back and pick 'em up.
They had two or three airplanes working and I had never jumped a
Twin Beech and that was going to be my first jump and she landed
and the landing gear just folded right up... off across the
runway she goes skiddin'. No injuries, I don't remember how much
the airplane was damaged or anything like that, it wasn't
anything great, big hairy affair. But it did blew my chance to
jump a Twin Beech which I'd never jumped. But the airplanes were
near, the pilots were terrific. Boy, Johnson used to have some
pilots, I'll tell you, some real characters and good pilots,
good, good pilots... Swede Nelson, Slim Phillips, Jack Hughes,
Hoyt Demers and some of those guys. I'd get in an airplane and go
with them anywhere, ya know. They had some real good ones.
I don't know, are we getting near the end of the tape? [laughs] Oh
I wasn't supposed to say that, was I!

KT That's OK. Can you describe a typical jump?

WB Oh, well you fly over and find the fire, you know, that
you're going to jump, and look the fire over and then you look
for a suitable spot to jump as close to the fire as possible.
And you kind of look it over and you can always tell more or less
what the direction the wind is blowing by looking at the smoke
from the fire. And then you go over and you pick your spot and
you fly over it and you drop a couple of drift chutes. See which
direction the wind's blowing and pick your spot. You know which
direction the wind's blowing and you discuss with the spotter how
much over the spot he's going to carry you into the wind. And then you hook up and he comes around and when you get about the spot you both agreed on or he'd agreed on and they'd cut the engine. You'd get up and you step out and your chute opens and you work your way to the spot. And if you'd get to the spot and maybe it's not too good a spot and you find out it isn't. That maybe you couldn't see all those rocks underneath the brush and grass and whatever. Somebody could get hurt jumping in there, then you wave 'em off and tell them to change the jump spot. But that doesn't happen very often, if there is any doubt about the spot, why they'd put the airplane right down in the trees and take a look at it good, ya know, to decide. But basically what you do is come around and pick your spot that looks good to you and discuss it, ya know, not big, long discussion, that looks pretty good, yeah, that looks pretty good. Close enough to the fire, drop the fire packs up by the fire and let us out here, ya know. Then go around and drop your drift chutes and jump in and get out of your gear and go get your fire packs and put the fire out is essentially what, ya know. No big dramatics really unless you were hungover, there was a lot of trauma then [laughs], that sort of thing and... Another thing then, I can't think of a better cure for a hangover than about two or three hours on a fireline working your fanny off. It'll make you well or kill ya. Most of the time it'd make you well. But no big, ya know, no... I worked on the movie project, you know, when they made the movie, "Red Skies in Montana". Boy, that was a farce. But we had a lot of fun with it. The first year they were going to make it, it was with Victor Mature and I don't remember who... and he got hurt. He wrecked Bill Riskin's motorcycle. But you know, we'd go out and build fires for 'em and make jumps for 'em. But they couldn't hire us, they couldn't hire us and pay us. I don't know what the financial arrangements were, but we did spend some time on this movie project. Like we'd go out and build fires for 'em and be in fire fighting scenes or jump for 'em and they'd have a camera plane, you know, following like training jumps or refresher jumps. They'd have their camera, boy, we used to go to, I'm sure we blew a lot of shots for 'em cuz somebody stick a streamer in their helmet, ya know, so that when they saw the movie they could say, "That's me", you know. Well they cut all that stuff out, ya know [laughs]. One of the nice things that was, one of the good things about working, they couldn't pay us, but they treated us pretty good. The people that spent the day on the movie project. There was a place right across from the airport down there was called the Casa Loma and... it's a library now, I think, or a library extension or something. But it's right across from the Vo-Tech and of course that was about where the runway was, you know. Right across the road was the airport and they'd take us in there and buy us dinner and we'd drink flaming Moscow Mules. They'd just get mangety [sic] and they'd pay for the whole thing, so the movie project wasn't too bad. [laughs] Let's see, the second year, no, I think John Lund was in the first one, the second year they made the movie, the second year they came back and reshoot the movie cuz Victor Mature was hurt. And I was in New Mexico at the time that that was being done so I missed out on most of that second year stuff. But I heard some
interesting stories so it was pretty good, kind of fun, and
you've got to remember that, like I was telling you about the
plane, the role on the New Mexico fire. Most of the guys were
pretty good at playing the role if they had the proper audience,
ya know. They could really ham it up and make it look good
[laughs] and it was part of the fun of it. As a matter of fact,
it was probably a big part of the fun of it is playing the role,
ya know. Like I say, when we first started it was about a 150
guys, you were fairly proud of yourself, ya know. And you took
reasonable opportunities to flaunt it in a discreet sort of a way
[laughs] We had a lot of fun with it anyhow.

KT Was there a certain look to a smokejumper?

WB Look? You mean appearance-wise?

KT Fashion, fads?

WB [pauses] not that I can recall. Almost everybody... I used
to wear those black jeans and most of the guys did and of course,
you wore what we called log...you know, logger boots. A lot of
the guys had Whites, I had DelRico's. And a work shirt and kind
of practical. I liked the white jeans better than the blue jeans
because they were a little more comfortable. You'd get out and
get real hot and sweaty and working hard, tight jeans just don't
get it, ya know. So I always wore those black, wide bottom, not
real wide, but fairly wide bottom jeans and a khaki shirt or a
denim shirt and a belt and a hat and work. A coat, always take a
coat when you're going to the mountains, ya know. And... but I
can't say that there was anything that resembled a uniform or the
smokejumper look at all. Most of the clothing applications were
primarily practical because... say you that you go into the
Selway or over to the Clearwater and got to walk fifteen or
twenty miles with your jump gear on your back. You're going to be
a little bit more concerned with being comfortable than you are
with being pretty because that's, you know, a little more
practical. We used to, not too often, whenever possible we
wouldn't have to, but sometimes, if there was a shortage of gear
and there was a hot fire season and stuff like that, you'd have
to pick up all your gear. You'd have to put it into seamless
sacks, it includes your jumpsuit and your chutes and your tools
and tie 'em on a packboard and throw it on your back and walk to
the nearest airstrip which could be a considerable distance away.
So... more concerned with a reasonable amount of comfort and
good protection, you know what I mean? Good tough... quality. You
may have to be in it for several days, you want it to last
[laughs] and a... to answer your question, I can't think of
anything that I would say, would say that that was the
smokejumper look because I don't recall...

END OF SIDE A
Because I don't recall any. The red hat, the red hat, felt hat was what everybody used to wear on a fire. You could roll 'em up real tight and stick 'em in your rope pocket and they were handy, ya know. Everybody kind of favored 'em and I guess if there was anything that was supposed to be a little bit distinctive about being a smokejumper you wore one of those little red felt hats. I think you used to pay a dollar and a quarter for 'em, or something, you know, nothing fancy. And you could just roll 'em up and stick 'em in your pocket. There were a few characters that wore cowboy hats, but then I think they wore cowboy hats cuz they were really cowboys, ya know, when they were smokejumping. But I... let me see was there anybody that was really different or anybody that... not really, that I can recall anyhow.

How did your family feel about you being a smokejumper?

They didn't have any problem with it... as far as... no. The old man says you're crazy and other than that, you know, no real problem. You mean like apprehension and fear and all that, oh, I don't think so. I don't think that was a factor at all. I would like to say that and I think this would hold true with most of the guys that I worked with, when I worked with 'em. They all had experience, work experience in the woods or whatever and the general feeling was, "Hell, I can take care of myself", you know. I've got good training, I'm physically fit, I'm alert and strong, you know... fairly self sufficient. I've proven that to myself and, I think, my family. My parents had the same feeling, ya know, it ain't really all that hairy. We don't normally tell girls that, but if you're in reasonably good shape and if you use your head, the equipment is good, the training is good, and sure, guys get hurt. But guys get hurt driving in cars. But if you keep, ya know, keep alert, learn what you're supposed to do, it ain't that bad, it ain't that tough. It's hard work, fires are hard work, fires can be dangerous if you're not heads up... I don't mean because, you know, in this country they don't burn that fast, usually, not always, but usually. But, you know, you have to be reasonably aware of the fact that trees are going to burn through and fall down and normally they want to slide down the mountain. You better be watching for that or rocks are going fall, ya know. Just the normal precautions, the things that you know you can reasonably expect and be on guard for 'em, right?

What was your most memorable jump?

[Pauses] You mean in the Forest Service. I can't... are you talking about the parachuting itself?

Or the fire.

Well... well, it would be a toss-up between the McKnight fire in New Mexico that ran us out of the country or the Spastic Chasm Fire as far as the fire was concerned. As far as the
jumps are concerned, I guess that I would say that the most exciting one was in New Mexico. Jumping out of the Noorduyn and... I got out of the airplane and I looked up and checked my canopy and it was perfect, completely deployed and everything was fine and I looked down at the ground and tried to turn toward the spot so that I could get to the spot and my parachute would not respond. And I looked back up and there was nothing wrong and I looked at Lloyd Brown who had jumped about the same time I had and boy, I was going down a heck of a lot faster than he was. I looked up at my chute again and there was nothing wrong with my parachute, but it would not respond and I was losing altitude way faster than he was. I was coming in hot, and I couldn't see what was wrong because there was nothing wrong that I could see. And I was having a little debate with myself about using my reserve which I was reluctant to do and about that time I hit a tree and broke a few branches out of it and everything. But boy, I was lucky that I hit the tree top. And of course, I missed the jump spot by an awful distance because I went straight down instead of drifting with the wind. As near as we could figure I just either got involved in a real peculiar air situation or heat situation because Al Hammond was droppin' us that time and he watched and he said he could see nothing wrong with my chute from the plane and I could see nothing wrong with my chute and Lloyd could see nothing wrong with my chute. It was completely deployed and I was just going down faster than hell. And they don't train you for that, see because nobody knows what, I didn't know what to do. I knew I was in trouble, but I couldn't figure out what to do and fortunately I went into a tree which is much better than hitting the ground. In that kind of situation I hung up before I hit the ground and fine, I didn't get hurt. But, and I don't know what happened. And that was probably pretty exciting for a minute there or two. I debated using my reserve, but I was reluctant to use it, too, because sometimes it'll get you, it'll rob air from the other one situation and make it worse, it depends. It's better you never have to fool with your reserve. It's better nothing goes wrong because if something goes wrong your problems have a way of multiplying rapidly. The best thing to do is to have good body position and a full opening [laughs] and most of the time you get that, almost invariably you get that. And I think that one of the reasons that you do it because you use good equipment and the people that get it ready for you to jump it, had it ready properly done, and because your training is good, ya know, and because you know what to do. But the equipment basically is always excellent. God, in the Army, used to have malfunctions up the yin-yang. Because they didn't have the quality control, the degree of interest, the degree of training or maybe because it was for too many people, I don't know. But, I will say that the equipment was good and you were trained how to use it and... I never had anything that even resembled, other than that one time, and I don't have any idea how many jumps I got. I never had any situation at all that was, ya know, hair raising or... anything like that at all, you couldn't work. The program went more or less as it was supposed to within reasons, considering the type of work you were doing. And... I say it's because of good training, good safety practices, and good
equipment, and good people to work with. I have never, hardly ever... worked at anything where I felt the degree of confidence in the abilities of the people that I was associated with than I have since the smokejumpers. We had some dingbats, believe me, but not when it came to the job, ya know. They were pretty good, most of 'em. And there again, part of it may be the time in my life that I was involved in it and I had no ambitions as far as the Forest Service was concerned, so I didn't get involved in some of the politics or any of the politics. My job was, my interest was it's a good summertime job to make money and to go to school and that's what I used it for. And I always felt real comfortable with the people I worked with.

KT You mentioned that you were in school during the off season, what did most of the other guys do during the off season?

WB You mean most of the guys that I went to school with?

KT No, that you jumped with, what did they do during the off season?

WB I would say that at the time that I was... a lot of 'em had, there were a few that stayed on year round at the loft and so on and so forth. Maybe not as many as they have now, although I have no idea what's going on out there now. Oh, some of 'em would work for the Forest Service and some of 'em had other jobs to go to. There were an awful lot of people working their way through school. When I was jumping, there were... I wouldn't want to put a percentage figure, but there were an awful lot of guys of guys that were doing it as summertime employment. There were very few full time people, smokejumpers, at that time. A few guys stayed around, repaired chutes and took care of equipment and that sort of thing. There were a few guys that would go over and work on the equipment development, the foreman and some of the squad leaders and so on and so forth. A lot of 'em... but... and some guys would have jobs in the woods or working construction or whatever. But by and large, mostly what I can remember is that most of the guys, except the permanent party, were college students, making some money for the summer. Which is foolish, you could've made more money working construction but we didn't know that, ya know, [laughs].

KT Do you think being a smokejumper effected the rest of your life?

WB I don't... well like I say, I... we were always pretty proud of ourselves and... no not excessively so, modestly so. We'd lay it on about as thick as we thought we could get away with it. But other than the feeling of what... accomplishment, one of the things that I really enjoyed, one of the things that I can look back on as one of the good times of my life and so on and so forth. And other than that, maybe the fact, you mean, ya know, did I learn any lessons, I don't understand what you mean.
KT Just an attitude or a feeling or something that applied to what you decided to do later in life?

WB Oh, I don't think that it affected what I... there were other factors that affected what I wound up doing. But a... no, except that maybe an attitude of... kind of a responsibility. If you're gonna do the job, you're gonna do the job, even if it gets a little tough. That's sort of what you have to do. But as far as... I, and it's something that I think back on and maybe you exaggerate a little bit, sometimes, I don't know, it depends on who I'm talking to, I guess, and what kind of mood I'm in when I'm talking. I... I... don't know...a damn good job for a young man. It was interesting and exciting a little bit glamorous and fun. Some good people, I have some good friends that I still see on occasion that date back to those times and we had something in common.

KT Do you have any more stories that you'd like to share with us?

WB Oh, let's see, gosh I... there's so many of 'em. Oh, you asked me about what we used to do on our time off? There used to be a fellow by the name of Ralph Cooke, who I went to school with and was also a smokejumper. And he was up on the Libby Project, now this is going to be a colorful story, OK, that's what you want, isn't it, a colorful story? Ralph Cooke was a pretty good chicken stealer, one of the best I have ever seen in my life. That guy could walk into a chicken house and put... and we were out probably drinking coke, I don't remember, ya know, coca-cola or pop of some kind or another. But weren't feeling too much pain and we were with some girls from up there at Libby. Somebody decided that maybe we should have some chicken. I don't know why everyone became obsessed with chicken, but nothing else would do, but chicken and everything was closed. So, Ralph says, "We'll get some chickens." So, we all pile into the car and we find a chicken house and put... and we were out probably drinking coke, I don't remember, ya know, coca-cola or pop of some kind or another. But weren't feeling too much pain and we were with some girls from up there at Libby. Somebody decided that maybe we should have some chicken. I don't know why everyone became obsessed with chicken, but nothing else would do, but chicken and everything was closed. So, Ralph says, "We'll get some chickens." So, we all pile into the car and we find a chicken house and we steal some chickens. Ralph just walks in and tickles 'em on the head and sticks their head under their wing, carry 'em off, put 'em on the floor of the car and they're just like they are out. Now there are six of us in the car, three girls and three guys. Nobody is feeling any pain, there are about six or seven chickens on the floor of the car. We leave the scene. Nobody is alerted to anything and we're heading back to town and we get stopped by a sheriff, deputy sheriff. He, Ralph was driving and, ya know, he did not, I mean, he was real cool. You couldn't tell he was drunk. "Oh yeah, we're smokejumpers, we're up here working." He really laid it on, the guy let us go and all the time I keep thinking to myself these damn chickens start acting up, we've had it, ya know. But we got away with it and we took all these chickens over to this girl's house and nobody could figure out how to kill 'em, see. Nobody really wanted to kill 'em, so we did without chicken and turned the chickens loose in this girl's house, and her parents weren't home and then left. Now, that wasn't very nice, was it? [laughs] But I remember thinking, I was sitting in the back seat with this girl and there were three or four or five or six chickens, I
don't remember how many, at my feet there were all with their heads safely tucked under their... and I thought oh, my God, here's this cop [laughs] ya know. I hear Ralph will be here, I know he'll be here, he's one of the guys I keep in touch with and I saw him and he told me he's gonna come over and stay with me for this thing. [National Reunion, Missoula, '84] It'll be interesting, he works for Honeywell now, he's an engineer. He's in charge up there of purchasing, I think. I see him... oh... every two or three years, so...

KT Do you have any other stories?

WB Gosh, I think I'm about talked out, how long have we been at this, an hour and a half?

KT I'd really like to thank you for this interview.

WB Okay, thank you.