Gregg Phifer: This is Gregg Phifer doing the interviewing. Professor of communication at Florida State University in Tallahassee. And now I have the experience of talking to one of Mr. Smokejumper himself. Oliver Petty. He didn't quite open up the camp, but came awfully close to it. So when did you come here?

Oliver Petty: I don't remember the exact date, but I came with the first group of jumpers after the camp was opened.

GP: So you weren't in on the original rigging training. The people who were trained to become riggers and therefore to handle the packing of a chute. But you came with the first group of jumpers. And you were trained here at Seeley Lake, where we are doing this interview, weren't you?

OP: Yes.

GP: Beautiful spot. What was it like then?

OP: I can see very little change in it except that the trees may be a little larger and it seems very much the same to me now.

GP: The water is still cold and still clear. It's a beautiful location for a camp, isn't it?

OP: It is indeed.

GP: What was here at the time? We didn't have this camp here, did we? Camp Paxson? Was that...

OP: The camp was here, the cabins were here. I can't tell you the cabin I stayed in during training. But the times that I've come back, I have a record of the cabins that I've stayed in.

GP: Well we're talking about Civilian Public Service. CPS. Smokejumpers. Civilian Public Service represented the religious objectors to war. Tell us just a little bit about your own religious background, if you would.
OP: Well, I came through the Christian Church, and I went to Eugene Bible College right out of high school. And during that experience, in my study of the bible and, at the time that I saw *All Quiet on the Front*...

GP: *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Lew Ayres played the lead there, didn't he?

OP: Yes. And I determined at that point that I never would be able to carry a gun against my fellow Christian.

GP: And Lew Ayres showed up at Cascade Locks [Oregon], where some of our smokejumpers came from, if I remember correctly.

OP: Yes.

GP: Well. Coming from the Christian Church, not one of the three historic pacifist denominations—the Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers—did you have any trouble getting the 4-E classification, as a conscientious objector?

OP: Not really. While I was in college...By the way, I have a degree in forestry—

GP: Oh really? That's interesting.

OP: From Oregon State College. And while I was in college I was very active in the Christian Church Young People's Group, and while I was there, the FOR came through and gave lectures and took signatures on the peace movement. We took pledges that we wouldn't take active part in war at that time. And out of five or six who signed those pledges I was the only one that actually stayed as a CO. One of them was a 4-F and one went into the Seabees, thinking that he would avoid the actual battle front. And the other two dropped out completely.

GP: Well, that's an interesting background. People have varied backgrounds coming into it. Now, how much college did you have before you went into the CPS?

OP: I got my degree, my B.S. in forestry, in 1940. And I went to CPS in June of 1941. I had gone back to college one term after I graduated to work on a minor that I was carrying in education. And then the draft board told me that I shouldn't—I went one term and the draft board told me that I wouldn't have time to finish another term. So I didn't go more than one term to finish it, my minor in education.

GP: Do you know if anybody else in the smokejumper unit had a forestry background, a forestry degree?

OP: No, I don't know any.
GP: You may have been the only one coming into this. And I imagine most of the smokejumpers were not in CPS. Of them, probably a lot of them had not been in forestry. Although this may have been a summer project for some of the University of Montana forestry students, from time to time. I wouldn't be surprised if that were true. But I don't know about that.

OP: I imagine it would be.

GP: Well, you went to camp. Where did you go first?

OP: I went to...it was camp number 2 at the time. It was the second camp that opened. It opened in Glendora, California. And it is an experimental forest area down there. San Dimas experimental forest. And I was assigned, because I had a forestry background, to the soils laboratory there, where I became the CPS director of the lab itself. And had the CPS fellows under me. Until smokejumping come up, well, I worked in the lab. When smokejumping came up I wanted to go into it. So I made application, and the question in my mind was, would I have to stay in smokejumping or could I come back there after the fire season? The director, who was directly over me in the forest service men, said that if I was to go—he'd give me a recommendation—and if I was to go that he would make application to have me return at the end of the fire season.

GP: To Glendora?

OP: To Glendora. And I did that two different winters. Summers in Montana smokejumping and the winters in Glendora in the soil—

GP: The best of all possible worlds. How about that? That must be the real classic for CPS assignments. Glendora in the wintertime and Montana in the summertime.

OP: Pullman reservations between the two.

GP: Oh my. I don't remember having a Pullman, coming from Reno, Nevada. I was in CPS 37, Camp Antelope. From there to Missoula. I may have had; my memory is a blank on that subject. I remember the train being very crowded, with a lot of servicemen going from hither and yon on all of these trains. So you were at Glendora and you were there for two of the winter seasons when you were at the smokejumper unit. You came here and got trained Seeley Lake.

OP: Yes.

GP: Got seven practice jumps, just like the rest of us.

OP: Seven practice jumps.

GP: Did you have any trouble with any of them?
OP: No. I think about the third one was my roughest one, and the hardest one to make. But after that, they were all easy.

GP: Not the first one. Number three was your hardest jump. Why that rather than number one?

OP: Because we train, we live, we eat, we sleep, everything we did was towards jumping. And so you didn’t ask why, or didn’t think about the possibilities. You jumped. Because that was the thing to do.

GP: And what happened on number three?

OP: Well, nothing happened, except that I began to wonder why I was doing it. And after I got through with number three, it was no problem after that.

GP: Now, one of those jumps, you were supposed to hang up in some trees. At least that’s when I went through the practice jump, and they had us hang up, or try to hang up. Did you hang up successfully in one of the trees?

OP: Yes. And on the fire jumps I’ve had—

GP: Let yourself down too.

OP: Yes. And let down.

GP: In 20 jumps, I have been totally unsuccessful in hanging up at all. Anywhere. On the fire jumps I’m delighted about that. On the practice jump, I was supposed to on about number four or five, and I hit the side of a tree and slid right all the way down to the ground. So I never got that. Well, after you finished your training here at Seeley Lake then where were you assigned?

OP: I was assigned to Big Prairie. However, it was before fire season, and they took us to Basin Creek, which is a short distance, 15 miles or something like that, from Big Prairie. And Basin Creek had a cabin and they put up tents for us. And we built fences and did trail work at Basin Creek.

GP: Some of those trails had been pretty badly overgrown since the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] days, when they cut through many of those trails and the CCC boys built them for us. I know carrying people out, or trying a rescue unit, or walking in, or coming out, oftentimes you’d have very hard trail. Well, you went to there, then where were you assigned for jumping?

OP: Big Prairie.

GP: Big Prairie.
OP: We walked from Basin Creek to Big Prairie.

GP: And that first season, how many jumps did you have? Talking about fire jumps.

OP: I think I had three.

GP: Three fire jumps. First year. That would be '43. Well that was not the big year for smokejumping—'45 was a big year. I know in '44 I had just three fire jumps and that's all. Do you remember anything about that first fire jump?

OP: No so much about the jump. Harry Mishler and I jumped together. And the thing that made the big impression—it was a rather small fire, didn’t take much to put it out. But the thing that I remember the most was that 80 pounds of jumping gear that we had to carry out.

GP: Oh no! They didn't send anybody in after you!

OP: Well, we had to carry about a mile and a half where they could bring the—we were on a steep hillside. And we made two trips doing it.

GP: Eighty pounds. I think I would have made at least two trips.

OP: Yes.

GP: Okay. Coming out. And the fire itself, relatively small. Which is, of course, the typical smokejumper fire. It gets pretty large, it's almost out of the smokejumper control. The place where we get the advantage is getting fast, before the fire has a chance to spread. Was that set by lightning, do you suppose?

OP: It was a lightning fire, yes.

GP: I guess most of the fires we fought were lightning fires. The backcountry, not many people in those days were able to get in there and therefore we didn't have much about man-made fires at all. Do you have any other memories of the first year that were particularly outstanding? How about your second or third jumps there? Do you remember either of those? They don't stand out. After three years, I guess they don't stand out.

OP: Yeah, they don't stand out. I had a total of 29 jumps. Practice and fire jumps. And I couldn't tell you now without going back through my records how many of those 29 were fire jumps. But I think the fire jumps that were the most experiencing to me were the ones that we made out of Winthrop, Washington. And we flew over there to a little airport and went up above Lake Chelan and came out and came down the length of the lake in a Forest Service boat, a tug that they had, and then got in the car, got in and took us around to the airport at Winthrop and then
we bedded down for a matter of two or three hours. And they got us up and we jumped on another fire. And that fire was in real high elevation, and it was sort of low brush and alpine trees type thing. It was fairly easy to control, but they sent a crew in and took us out. But the next morning, when we got up everything was white with snow. We walked out on snow. And came back to the airport and then they flew us back to Missoula.

GP: I never got out to Washington. I guess most of the people of my period didn’t get out that far. Let me go back for just a moment to the training program they had here at Seeley Lake. I’m familiar with that at Ninemile. I suppose it was very much the same. You saw us, I suppose, at Ninemile, go through some of our training, did you?

OP: Yes. We helped in some cases.

GP: Pretty much the same sort of thing you had here at Seeley Lake?

OP: Mm-hmm.

GP: What part of it do you remember most, or perhaps worst, if any?

OP: There's no part of it that really stands out. I think the hardest part was jumping off of the tower. And when we got used to that, then I don't feel that the rest of it—I’ve always been physically active, so the actual training wasn’t too much of a strain on me.

GP: You were lucky that way. Some of the people were not. I had gone through a good many fires myself, both at Buck Creek and then at Coleville. So I was probably in better shape than I otherwise would have been. But the tower jump is one thing I remember. And I remember being shaken much worse on the tower jump than I was on the actual parachute jump. Really shook me up.

OP: My first chute was a...what was the big chute?

GP: Eagle.

OP: The Eagle.

GP: Yes.

OP: Was the Eagle chute and I got a fairly severe opening on the first jump. But the first jump happened instantaneously. You come out of the plane and the thing opens right now. After you make a jump or two, then you begin to wonder. There’s a time lapse and you begin to wonder if the chute’s going to open. After you get through the excitement and the buildup of the first jump, then you begin to appreciate the timespan and what’s really going on. The first time you go out there, there is no time. You’re doing it because it’s being done.
GP: I remember the opening of a parachute as being much like a big hand reaching down and suddenly grabbing me and stopping me from falling, so that I had been sliding through the air and all of a sudden a hand reached down and a tug on my shoulders and I don't remember being badly shaken at all.

OP: I never got the sensation of falling all the time I was parachuting.

GP: Well you don't have anything to match it against. You really don't. In other words, you were falling beside a big building or something like that, you'd see whoosh, go by there. But just in the air you're floating there.

OP: You're not falling to the earth, you're approaching the earth. There's no sensation of falling. There never has been in my case, anyway. You're a unit to yourself, and the earth is another unit and you're approaching it.

GP: So during the winter season, when most of the rest of us were on various projects of different kinds—I remember building a bridge at Lozeau, Montana, and working in the tree farm, the nursery out at Savenac. During that time you were back at Glendora. Same sort of project you had before.

OP: The first year, yes. The second year I was on a survey crew. We surveyed a telephone line. About five miles, through brush, and we had to cut a trail through the brush to actually get our instruments in there, do our surveying through. And had a crew under me, and I run the instruments and kept the records of it. And Homer Chance, who is now a smokejumper, or was a smokejumper, he was on my survey crew. And it was through him, through our contact that he was interested in coming to smokejumping.

GP: Well, with 29 jumps, you had nine more than I did. I suppose, probably, those nine—well, maybe not, because you maybe had a refresher jumps.

OP: Yeah, we had a refresher jump every year.

GP: Okay. So maybe you had maybe six or seven more fire jumps than I did. Does any one of them really stand out in your mind? Something that was dramatic for one reason or another?

OP: No. I can’t say that it was. Nothing happened to me, outstanding, except—well, it wouldn’t be an exception either, but one of the jumpers came down when we were out of Hamilton, on the ridge above Hamilton in Montana, they come down on the ground, and the ground [unintelligible]. And I was probably 1,000 feet from where he came down, and you could hear him all over the top of that mountain. His chute had fouled and he come down like a maple leaf. And when he hit, he just, you could hear it. The ground [unintelligible] and you could hear it. And yet he got up and walked away from it. His twirling—his chute was fouled and he twirled...
like a maple leaf. And it slowed enough that it didn't hurt him when he got down. I remember that. One fire, and I can't give you the name of it now, they jumped us—there was eight of us went out, they jumped a mess kit for us, and camp for eight people, and I worked until dark that night on the upper end of that fire. And I come into camp and nobody'd done anything. They were sitting on these boxes—

GP: Oh no!

OP: —food, and nobody had done anything. And I was pretty irritated. I got together and set up a temporary camp right now, and fixed a meal for the gang. The next day the fire blowed up. And they had 24 men in there before it was done. Then they dropped a full camp in. And I was the cook. Ray Phibbs was my flunkie, helper. I got pretty well acquainted with him at that time.

GP: I expect you did.

OP: And I really enjoyed Ray. But after that then they knew I could cook and I jumped on one fire on Augusta, over on the Augusta side of the mountain, we came out at Augusta, Montana. And they jumped me as a cook. And then later, after that, when it come to winter project, I hadn't been...it was in '46, in which I was due for release, and I hadn't been released yet. They put me as a cook to a survey crew, and I couldn't give you the name of the place now. I'd have to go back through my records to find out. But they put me as cook there. While I was there, they sent a message in, or phone in, that my release had come through. And they sent another man in to relieve me and I stayed overnight in Savenac and went on from there.

GP: Yes. So, your specialty there was cooking. I did a little cooking down at Olustee, Florida, when the regular...one of CPS men did the cooking there, very small unit, maybe ten men altogether, Forest Service experimental unit. And when he went on furlough, the rest of us had to kind of take over. So for the first time in my life, I cooked for a group of men. I don't think I did a very good job, either. I'm sure you did a much better job than I did.

OP: They bragged of my cooking, particularly on that first fire. I always kidded them, said, as hungry as people get on there, that you can put a little gravy on an elk turd and it'll still be good.

GP: [laughs] Yeah. Well, I remember those K-rations. On some of the fires, did you have the K-rations?

OP: Yeah.

GP: Oh. Chopped pork and egg yolk. We used to sing about that.

OP: We didn't eat them when we...unless we had to.
GP: Unless we had to. Did you ever cook them a little bit over a fire, sometime, try to make them eatable?

OP: I don’t remember that we did.

GP: And those cookies they had, the little slab of soybean something or other. I used to be dead sure they were made out of sawdust. Did you ever learn to like them?

OP: No. There wasn’t any of that that I really learned to like.

GP: Oh. Well, the chocolate bar wasn’t too bad.

OP: It was all right.

GP: And the little lemonade. Mix that up with some water, somewhere, and you’re not too bad off. But the rest of it, I agree with you. Oliver Huset, however, loved the crackers. He used to exchange [with] people, because he was a vegetarian. He would exchange chopped pork and egg yolk, or whatever other meat it was. Spam, whatever they had in, with other people to get crackers. And nobody could quite understand that. Now, during your experience of 29 jumps, were you ever in on a rescue unit?

OP: Never was. It was all fires.

GP: All fires. I was dropped on one supposed to be a rescue unit. They’d already carried him out to the trail, so we fought the fire, even though we were dropped in theoretically thinking we were going to be the rescue unit. We certainly weren’t. What was the largest fire you were on? Was that the one where you were serving as a cook?

OP: Yeah. The one that was out of Augusta, Montana, was the largest. On the other side of the divide.

GP: Now you jumped in Montana, Idaho, Washington?

OP: Washington.

GP: Oregon?

OP: No.

GP: Never in Oregon. Or California.

OP: No California.
GP: So you had three states. Now I jumped just a couple of times in Montana, and more in Idaho. Idaho was a main thrust for everything I did. I suppose most of your fires were very much like most of the ones I attacked. The smokejumpers had a real advantage for a very small fire before it ever blew up. If we could get to it and get it under control while it was still a snag and a little around the snag, perhaps, around the tree, then we were lucky.

OP: Usually we worked right straight through until the fire was under control. We never took any time out.

GP: Once you got a line around it. That was a critical thing. Then you might relax a little bit, have something to eat, possibly even. I remember on some of the fires, one or two of us slept while the other patrolled, or stayed around to be sure it didn't break the line. Do you remember making any of the deep cuts at the bottom of a fire line, when it was a steep slope, trying to keep the pinecones from rolling across the trench line at the bottom?

OP: No. Never got into that situation.

GP: I did. A couple of my fires I was on we made a rather deep trench at the bottom of the fire to catch the pinecones before they rolled on and kept things under fire.

OP: I don't remember why our fire...the first one that I cooked on, we had a line around it, and I came in to fix the dinner, had to come in and fix dinner that night. I don't remember why it blew up, but it got away from us. When it did, then they had to drop a full crew in because it spread pretty fast.

GP: Oh, they do. They can move fast, I know. Awfully fast. Were you ever in front of a fire that was beginning to blow up?

OP: Not here. I got one in California, but I never...When I was a ground crew, before I come into smokejumping. I have come to the point where I have been in front of a fire to the point where I just practically give up. In other words, "so what?" and just ready to quit. I can see how a person could burn to death. Because you get to a certain point where you're frustrated, you're out of breath, the smoke, you're choking, I assume it would be something like drowning, that you just get to a place where that's all you want to, is just get out of it.

GP: The worst I had was when we were on a big fire. We were on one small section of a fire that was obviously very much larger. They were going to have to bring in a big crew for this. But we were trying to stop that particular part of the fire. That was our responsibility. And it started blowing up on us around, oh, maybe 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon. And the only thing we could do was get off to the side and let it go. That's what we just had to do. There wasn't any alternative to that particular experience.
OP: The cases we had in Hayden, California—I think we held that fire all right, but I went just as far as I dared to go and still get out of it. That’s the way I felt about it.

GP: I remember, after CPS days, Wag Dodge had a group of people who burned. That was some years after the CPS days.

OP: Yes. I could understand, or feel sorry for them. Understand how they got that way.

GP: Oh, yes. I could too. I suspect if they’d followed orders, or done what they were supposed to, they would not have died, but when a fire's racing at you it's hard to think straight. I know that.

OP: If the smoke was coming and if you were running in the smoke and getting out of breath, you wouldn’t be able to get away from it as fast as you could if you were running without the smoke coming after you, or the fire after you.

GP: What was the most desolate country you jumped in? Hard to remember.

OP: It's hard to remember what the most desolate was. I think the furthest back, away from any roads or anything, was up above Lake Chelan. And that was alpine country, big country, and we came out—no roads at all—came out to the lake, the upper end of the lake, and then they brought us down with a Forest Service tug to the—

GP: Brought a boat out there for you.

OP: Brought down to the lower end of the lake.

GP: One of the nicest sights that I remember on the fires was the sight of a pack train coming in. Usually bringing in food and ready to take out our equipment, 80 pounds of equipment.

OP: And usually, when the pack string comes in, if you don’t have the fire under control, they will bring a crew with them.

GP: Yes. Oftentimes true.

OP: And then you turn the fire over to the crew and they clean it up.

GP: Well. On several fires I was on, they sent in a crew from a local ranger office, and the crew stayed to do the cleanup, mop up work. We got the first under control. That was a thing we could do because we went there fast and if they needed us back in Missoula they’d pull us out, be ready to jump on another fire. It was especially true in 1945, when we were going around and around. We just tried to get somebody else to mop up. To use us as mop up was really not
very efficient use of our services. Well, have I left something out of your smokejumper experience that we should have talked about?

OP: Well, I don’t think so. There’s a lot of experiences that, had I have prepared or went through my records ahead of time I could probably give you. Other experiences. But whether they’re pertinent to what we’re doing, I’m not sure. There was nothing really outstanding there.

GP: Did you work on a fire with other units, such as blister rust boys, Mexican laborers, or others?

OP: Never did.

GP: Never did. I understand on some of the fires, they had German or Italian detainees. I don’t know that they used any prisoners of war on the fires that I knew about. There was also the 555th Negro Parachute Battalion that was used on a few fires. But you never were on a fire with them. Neither was I.

OP: Never had any [unintelligible].

GP: Although some of the big fires I was on, some of the biggest, like Meadow Creek, they brought in large numbers of Mexican farm workers and blister rust boys to help control the fire. That was one of those that got out of control and we couldn’t do anything about it. You never were up on a lookout then, or were you?

OP: No. I never—I had no injuries, and—

GP: [unintelligible]?

OP: No reason not to jump. I visited a lookout or two. We’d hike up and the second after the training in ’44, they took us out on the Flathead River, right below Glacier National Park, and we did phone line maintenance. And I was up to the lookout there. I don’t remember the dates, but they had an eclipse of the moon, and we went to the eclipse. It was eclipse of the sun. [Unintelligible] eclipse. And we went to that. We went up the lookout, where we could see that. Things like that, we did. We stayed in Forest Service cabins and we got word one morning that we were to be ready to move, to go to another area, and they were going to send a pack string in to take us to another area. There was five of us, five or six of us. While we were packing up, I opened the front door and there was a bear sitting on the front porch. When I opened the door he got down and went around the cabin to the back, and I called the fellows and we watched him, and he went out back, about 200 to 300 feet, something like that, to our garbage pit. He sticks his head down in the garbage pit, with his rear end sticking up, and he got to working, and finally he decided to go down into the garbage pit, and he went down in there, and when he went down in, it was lunchtime, and we started to fix lunch. One of the jumpers decided he was going to have a bear skin. So he took the splitting axe, which was never a very sharp axe,
and I and another fellow come to the back door, and here he stood over the garbage pit with an axe raised over his head, waiting for the bear to come up. And we hollered at him to get out of there because we could see the bear tearing him up if he went through with it. Well, the bear, when we hollered, came up, and he swung that axe, almost like a cartoon, with both feet off the ground, he swung that axe, and hit the bear on the side of the head. And the bear come out and walked off about 50 feet and sat there and looked at him, as if to say, well, what in the hell do you think you’re doing? And we were surprised that he didn’t get attacked by that bear but the bear never bothered him. And he didn't get his bear rug. The packer was there the next day or so and he said that he saw the bear again. He had a big scar on the side of his head in the place where the hide had been broken. That was Phil Thomforde.

GP: Did you run across any other wildlife? How about deer and so forth?

OP: Oh, we saw deer. All the time, we saw deer.

GP: How about fishing? Are you a fisherman?

OP: At Big Prairie is one of the places where you have to almost literally stand behind the tree to bait your hook. It was eight of us there and we all had licenses and we had fish hanging out our ears pretty near. I got really burned out on fish, as far as I was concerned. I have caught my share in there, but I haven't fished much since.

GP: Burned out. So easy, fishing there. Standing behind a tree to bait your hook. Otherwise they'd jump out after you. Well, let's see, before you went to CPS, at Glendora, you'd been in school, college. Had you worked at all at other jobs before going into CPS?

OP: Out of school, because I couldn't go back the winter term—I went to fall term, I couldn't go back the winter term because the draft board said that I would go before it was over—I got me a job then on a road survey crew for the Snow Peak logging company. Out of Lebanon, Oregon. And I worked there about three months, three to four months, and I had my physical in Lebanon and then I went on, I think it was the 21st of June, 1941. I had graduated in June of 1940 from college.

GP: When did you get into bees?

OP: When CPS was over I was discharged. I tried to go back into the smokejumper, inquired in going into it, and they said that they wouldn’t accept any, or make any promises until after the paratroopers who wanted, or men with the military preference that wanted to, came in. So I began to look for something that I could do that I could be my own boss and that I could be independent. And I had saved a little money, but didn’t have very much. I needed something I could get into without too much investment. So I went back to California and hunted up a beekeeper and I worked for one beekeeper for four years.
GP: Why did you hunt up a beekeeper? Now you've been in school, you'd had college, with a forestry degree. You'd been in CPS for some time with the smokejumpers, you explored that possibility, it didn't work out. Why bees?

OP: When I was growing up, we got our honey from bee trees. In cutting bee trees, my dad had some bees and I was able to handle them, and in cutting bee trees I found that bees very seldom bothered me. They didn't go out of their way to sting me. And then when I was in camp in Glendora, we caught swarms, I and three other fellows. And we had a little bee organization in there, we bought equipment on the outside. One of the fellows went into Bern (?), and he'd pick up the equipment. And we caught swarms, and I had four or five hives there. And I realized I could handle them. And so I felt that I could get into beekeeping with minimum investment and I would be independent and be my own boss. So I worked for one beekeeper for three years and another one for one year, and then I bought 500 colonies of bees. And my home was in Oregon. I bought these in Northern California, single hives, and moved them to Oregon on May the second, 1950.

GP: Whereabouts in Oregon?

OP: Albany, Oregon. And my home is in Creswell, Oregon, which is about 60 miles south of Albany. And that's how I got started in bees. And I got married, was 35, I got married on April the 2nd and moved my bees to Oregon on May the 5th. I had started beekeeping and my family all at the same time.

GP: How about your wife? Does she participate in any of this beekeeping?

OP: She did at the start. She was very interested in it when she was interested in me. But as we started having a family, well she's got clear away from beekeeping. She understands it and would help me if it was something that wasn't too strongly physical for her. She attends the bee meetings and I was secretary of the Oregon State Beekeepers Association for 18 years in one stretch, and then I come back and four more years, made a total of 22 years that I was secretary. She was always helping me with that. We raised five kids, five children, two girls and three boys. None of the boys wanted the bee business, so in 1980 after I'd had it for lacking two months of 30 years, I give a contract and sold it, sold it to one of the fellows that hard work for me back in the '60s.

GP: Now you work for him.

OP: Now I work for him. I'm still helping him. He was complaining that he needs to be weaned from me. It's like a cow trying to wean a calf. He says he's got to figure out some way to get me out of it, because I'm not going to be around very much longer.

GP: Not forever, that's right.
OP: But he's been very successful. I don't owe the bees anything, or they don't owe me anything.

GP: Now, the smokejumper experience apparently was a pretty interesting one for you. You've come back to each of the reunions, haven't you?

OP: Have been to all the reunions, yes.

GP: All the reunions.

OP: My wife came with me the first reunion, then I brought my three boys the second reunion.

GP: Did they like the experience of coming back to the place where you had worked?

OP: They just thought it was wonderful. The boys did. It's outdoors, all of my boys were outdoor-type of fellows. They backpack and ski and all that, hunt, fish. So this was a real nice experience for them, to come back here.

GP: What souvenir do you keep at home, of your smokejumper experience? Any?

OP: What—

GP: Souvenirs. Or records. Remembrances.

OP: All I have is pictures that I've taken is the main thing that I have. One of the things that I did when I was in camp was do the photography developing work. Out at Big Prairie I used a cornflake box, a big huge box with a hole in it, for light exposure, and I'd put a gas lantern in that, and then I would expose my negatives and things to print pictures in that box. And I developed pictures for a lot of the fellows. A lot of the pictures that's floating around here were pictures that I developed and fixed up. And I made up a kit, then, a developing kit, so that they could go to different camps, so that the fellows could do their own developing if they wanted. Some of the fellows who had a little knack at that and wanted to. And that was used two or three different times.

GP: Well. If you had to do over again, would you make the same choices?

OP: I think I would. I would definitely make a choice for smokejumping. I sometimes wonder if I would take as adamant a stand on conscientious objector as I did at that time, but you never know until you get into the situation, and I was very adamant on the thing. When I was seeking a 4-E classification, I went to one of my professors in college, one of them who I was an A student under, and he said, "Oliver, you have a right to your belief. I will respect it." But he says, "You have no business doing this [going to war]." And he was on the Corvallis draft board at the time. So I didn't have any problems getting my 4-E classification.

Oliver W. Petty Interview, OH 163-030, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
GP: Had you ever considered 1-A-O?

OP: Yes, I had, but I felt that I had to go all out. That I didn't want to support the effort at all.

GP: Well, of course, some people went all out by going to prison. Ever think of that?

OP: I would have at the time. I would have gone to prison, if it had been necessary to have done.

GP: If they rejected your application for 4-E.

OP: Then people say, well, you're a draft dodger. But I'm not, because the government made provisions for me, and therefore I was just as legal as the man who went into military service.

GP: You were that. That's right.

OP: And I try to point that out if somebody questions the fact that I was a dodger, because I was a CO.

GP: Have you talked about your CPS experience, your smokejumper experience with people other than your family back home?

OP: Yes, I've talked with several different people, and showed pictures that I've taken. And as a matter of interest, I have interested, through my connection with my brother's son, Joel Petty. He was in college, he took forestry in college, and he now is one of the supervisors, capacities at the Redmond smokejumper headquarters, in Redmond, Oregon.

GP: Now do those people still train at Ninemile, I mean Missoula Region 1?

OP: No, no. They have their own—

GP: Separate training program.

OP: They have their own training program right there. And they have a loft just like we do here at Missoula.

GP: For rigging the chutes.

OP: It's a real nice place. I haven't seen him lately, but had several jumps and he had an injury not related to jumping, which sort of grounded him. But he went right into the supervisory capacity then, so I don't know whether he actually jumps now or not.
GP: Do you have any brothers?

OP: Yeah, I had two brothers.

GP: Two brothers. What did they do during wartime?

OP: Well, one of them went to camp and he was afflicted with a pneumonia-type of allergy to the dust at the base camp, and he got a 4-F out of that, or got a medical discharge. The other brother had a hernia, a type of hernia where the testicle is up in the body. And he wanted to go into the air force. And they told him that if he would have that corrected they would take him in the air force. And he says, if you want me in the service you can correct it for me. So he had a 4-F. He taught school and that type of thing.

GP: Thanks Mr. Smokejumper. Appreciate very much talking with you about three years, one of the originals. One of the people that may not have opened the camp originally, but were in the first jumping group to be trained here at Seeley Lake. Went through all three years. Even if you weren’t here winters. I spent the winters around here too. And some of those were fairly rough, building that bridge out of Lozeau, or at the Savenac nursery out at Haugan. Oh well. We survived it. And thanks very, very much.

[End of Interview]