The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Bayard Van Gieson: You didn’t get much choice of which planes. You had certain abilities and specialties, something that you were good at and they put you where you were best able to exercise your abilities. This could be a whole other story. Nobody has interviewed me, but I have written a book about it, which is home published. (Brings book to show to me.)

I had experiences and contact with people who spoke about things that happened. They are not published anywhere else. There is some kind of unique incidents in there. I don’t know what to do with the book. I only made eight or ten of them.

There were people after the war, the 20th Air Force Association would get together every once in a while. These people that were the movers and shakers would be interviewed and they just volunteered to talk and visit. A lot of it came from that. But they were the generals and the people that made things happen. The things that they spoke about hadn’t been published and some of those stories are in the book. It’s not anything real special, but there are some unique things in it.

Something that I covered in there is the Japanese atrocities that occurred. There’s a lady named Alice Chang that wrote a book: *The Rape of Nanking* is the name of it. She spells out some of it. They had medical people that made experiments on living humans. They killed literally thousands, twenty or thirty thousand people, doing that. I wrote quite a bit about that. Things that have not been published, not thoroughly, anyway. I really don’t know what to do with the thing and I spent quite a bit of time on it.

I know Stan Cohen and he’s pretty pragmatic about publishing. He lets you know that chances of selling the thing in a very large quantity are pretty poor. He’s clued me in on the costs of publishing and things of that sort. It’s just to the point where I’ve got it done and I don’t know what to do with it.

The group that dropped the atom bombs were part of our group. The bomb groups usually had three squadrons, and they were our third squadron. They were just mysteriously taken away from us and trained. When we ended up overseas, we’d had maybe thirty missions against Japan when they showed up. The rank and file didn’t know that they had an atom bomb. They were stationed close to us and we visited back and forth and everybody speculated as to what their purpose was.

We were pretty closely associated with them and it is interesting to know how little they knew what was going on.
My father cut mining timbers for the Butte mines, which were going full blast when I was a child. After WWI, the demand for those went down. He couldn’t get people to work for him. People were traveling all over the country looking for a place to settle down. So he sold out there in Avon and moved to Missoula. I think I was three years old.

I returned to Missoula after the war.

Missoula was kind of my home. I had gone to school in Bozeman, engineering school, trying to make up my mind what to do after the war. I didn’t go back to engineering school after the war. I had spent a good part of my youth, been connected with sawmills, forestry, and that sort of thing, so I went to the University here and graduated in forestry after the war. I had almost a degree in electrical engineering and then changed over.

I never really had any regrets. I think if I had continued on in electrical engineering, I would have probably gotten some kind of an administrative job there and sat around and got fat (laughs). So I just changed over.

In my career, when I got out of high school, I went into logging for Harper Brothers in the Bitterroot Valley. I was a crosscut sawyer up there, which is one of the hardest jobs you can get. I worked for a while at that and figured there were better things to do than be a crosscut sawyer. I worked in Rye Creek and the East Fork of the Bitterroot. They had a camp up there that we stayed in. Leelyn Harper and another brother...I don’t remember his name.

When I got back from the military, I bought a logging outfit and went to work for the Idaho Pole Company in Bozeman. I logged for them for about two years.

One other job: there was a guy running a planer mill and he didn’t know how to run it. He hired me to run his mill for him. I did that for just a few months. Then I decided I’d go to forestry school, and finished on the GI Bill.

Helen was a big help. She sold Stanley Products. We rented a house in town and I worked the night shift at the Bonner sawmill, on the green chain, for part of that time.

When I got my degree, we had three children. They attended the graduation service and hollered, “Hey, there’s our dad up there.” It was different.

I went to work at the town of Rexford, in Western Montana, at the ranger district. That was my first Forest Service job. I was the chief scaler. They had a big landing up there for the J. Neils Lumber Company, which was one of the bigger lumber companies up there. I measured the volume of the logs, and stuff.
Part of the logs were part of the big bark beetle epidemic. They were all beautiful trees coming in there, some of them six feet in diameter on the base. The beetles had killed them. It was kind of interesting: when they’d dump them off on the rollways, the bugs would fall out, the larvae. There was a woodpecker there. That bird figured that was the best job he ever had was running around picking up those bugs. Just to stay in practice he’d go over and peck on the stakes that were on the railroad cars. He was so fat he could hardly fly.

Suzanne Vernon: How did you get to Condon from Rexford?

BVG: They needed to do survey work in all these remote drainages where the spruce trees were located. They turned me loose. I went into places that people had never been in. It was an interesting job. One whole year, I never spent a day in the office. I loved it. That was surveying this beetle damage. It was kind of a scientific survey. I had the engineering background, so I located roads in and out of these remote drainages using an Abney level. Today, these engineers would have a fit thinking about a crude instrument like that. They actually built a lot of these roads on those locations. I’d say there were probably several hundred miles of them. That was on the Kootenai National Forest. I was stationed at Rexford, Libby and at Troy.

At Troy, I had done some work on what they call strangulation, where you put a tight band around a tree. The food in the tree travels in the outer part of the living layer. If you squeeze it tight enough the food can’t get down to the roots. The top thinks it is getting fat so it puts out seeds. I did some work on that and had gotten a little notoriety out of it. So they figured, “This guy, we’ll make a ranger out of him.”

So they sent us to Condon. That was my first appointment as a district ranger. I had been an assistant ranger before that. I replaced a Bob Frye, who was the ranger there before me.

We were actually the first family who stayed all year long at the Condon Ranger Station. We hadn’t seen Condon before. We had no idea. We had gone up and down the Mission Valley and we were told that Condon was over the mountains. We hadn’t the foggiest idea what Condon looked like.

We came here together. They said pack up your stuff and told us where we were to go. We came from the north and that was kind of an interesting trip. The Swan Valley highway was under construction. Little sections of it were usable. We came down the old road that went through the big old ponderosa pine forest. The natives told us that they hadn’t cut a tree when the original road had been built. They just run it in and out of the big trees. It was just two ruts. Our second son got car sick and he said when I get in there I’m never leaving.

SV: (to Helen) What was your impression?

Helen Van Gieson: It was something new and different. I thought we were going into the wilds of the country when we went up to Condon. We came up to the old ranger station there. It was
a new experience. They didn’t have electricity then. They had an old generator in a hole. You’d have to start up the motor to get the lights to work. When we first moved up there, we started out in the evening. Pretty soon the lights would go off. We’d be sitting there in the dark and we’d have to light a lamp.

BVG: I wrote some things down about life at the station. We had wood heat; there was no fuel, oil, or anything like that. When we came in there, there were two residences. One was up on the hill and was really primitive. It was the alternate ranger’s residence. The big three story log place there for the ranger’s residence. It was a pretty nice little place. Later on, we got a house moved in there from the Hungry Horse Dam, a surplus house. It was situated between the two old buildings. Later on, the Hungry Horse house was moved down to the new station.

We had to cut our own wood. For cooking we had a combination wood and propane stove. It did the job. For electric power, there was no REA power. It came in later. We had a light plant that we bought from the surplus. Thank heaven I had some electrical background. It was a three-phase outfit. We used it. But it was turned off at 10 o’clock at night, so you’d better have your things done.

Water for the station came from a well down in the swale, with an underground pump. You started a one-line gas motor by hand pulling. It always went bad when all the fellas were in town in the winter. Helen hated that pump! It would pump water into an overhead tank for gravity feed out to the various buildings. In the wintertime, the piping that went up to the tank would freeze. We’d be out there in the blizzards with a propane torch trying to thaw out the pipes.

HVG: We had a washing machine. We’d run it when they had the power going. You couldn’t run it any other time. If you didn’t have the power going, you didn’t have machine.

BVG: The only phones we had there were the grounded line, with just a single wire. They used a ground for the other return. It never worked. It was connected to the Swan Valley station and, once in a great while, it would go through. The thing we had was what they called the SPF radio. We could contact Kalispell office with that. They had UHF radios, but they were line-of-sight transmission. You couldn’t get very far. We were pretty well isolated as far as communication is concerned.

The grounded phone lines went to the lookouts, also. In the cookhouse they had an elaborate switchboard. All the lookout lines came into it. And then the line to town went out of it.

We had no medical service in the valley. No police. No TV. I had some disturbing memories about TV. We got one. We had these “yaggy” antennas, they called them. You put them up on a big post. If you got them high enough, you could maybe get some radio reception. I was up on top of that three-story ranger station, trying to get this antenna up so we could find something. They were directional. We had to turn them around one way or another. When we’d bring in a

Bayard “Bob” Van Giesen and Helen Van Giesen Interview, OH 422-197, 198, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
station, they’d all get eyeballed to the TV set. I’d holler, “How are we doing?” and I couldn’t hear a word out of them. We had our problems with TV.

We plowed our own snow there. We didn’t have any facility from the county or anything. They’d left a motor patrol in. Either Herb Styler or I would get on that and follow the roads out. That was our only way to get access.

Beavers would flood the road coming in there. They had beaver ponds. So we’d have to go dynamite the beaver ponds every once in awhile.

We had an ice house. We’d go down every winter and put up ice from Holland Lake and cut blocks of ice and put them in this ice house. So the cookhouse had ice all winter long. If needed it, we could use it. The lake would freeze. Then we’d sweep the snow off of it, or scoop it off. There was a guard station at Holland Lake. It was deep there. We’d cut the ice blocks with a chain saw.

They did things pretty informally in those days. The people who were building the Swan Valley highway, they had built it right to where the road turned off to go into the old station. They stopped it there. It was a pretty nice highway built up to that point. You could come down there doing sixty or seventy miles an hour. Then it ended! We were eternally going down there and people would come walking up the road. Their car would be stuck off in the boonies somewhere, off the end of the road.

We’d go down with the motor patrol, and pull them out. Now, they would go hire a lawyer and sue the county of something.

The cookhouse was operated during the summer. We had a cook there, Dick Williams. He was famous all over the place. The guy could put out the best meals you ever ate. They’d bring dignitaries from all over the country to go into the Bob Marshall Wilderness area. They’d always hire Dick to cook for them. Like Sherman Adams. Dick cooked for him. There is kind of a story about that, too.

Sherman was the right hand man to President Eisenhower. He was about second in command in the United States. He showed up. He wanted a little rest and relaxation. They were going to take him to the Bob Marshall, to Big Prairie Ranger Station. He would be about as far away from civilization as you could get there.

Anyway, Pete Hanson and Fred Neitzling came along with him. They were going to show him around the Bob Marshall. They gathered up Dick as a cook. The four of them got in a helicopter and went into the Bob Marshall. They no more than got to the Big Prairie Ranger Station and it started to rain. Of course it fouled up their plans for entertaining Sherman Adams. Hanson and Neitzling, I don’t think they could have entertained a gold fish. They were stuck. Dick was not a respecter of persons. He didn’t give a damn who you were. There were things to do there, so he
gathered them all up and delegated chores for each of them. He had Sherman Adams working right along with the rest of them. (laughter)

He was enjoying this! They had supper, and what do you do after supper? Well, Dick learned that Adams could play...

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
BVG: Dick learned that Adams could play cards. When the trip was over, everybody came out and forgot about it. Here comes in the mail from Sherman Adams to Dick Williams, thanking him for the wonderful time that he’d had there. Dick had the letter posted on the bulletin board at the cookhouse.

Sherman loved being treated like a common person. A person in a position like that, they don’t meet real people. There is always somebody wants something. Here was old Dick: he didn’t give a damn for anything. Let’s have fun. That was his philosophy.

They went in on a helicopter and landed at Big Prairie.

The post office, the store and the locker plant were owned by Russ and Delores Conkling. It served everybody. The other store, Mrs. Strom had that. She was a pretty crusty old gal. She didn’t back off from anybody. The barroom was Liquid Louie’s. I think Louie was gone by then. The rec hall, the community hall, was a place where they had dances and get-togethers. It was kind of the recreation center. I used to play the piano for them. People like things like the Johnson Rag. There were half a dozen that I would play for them. Anything with a little spirit, they went for.

They had canned music there, too. I’d get tired of playing, so I’d quit.

We bought groceries at Conklings. They were close.

Shortly after I came in there, I got a call that they were making a Forest Service history. I did a lot of research there, and met with a lot of the older people in the valley. We put this history together for them. The history of who was the ranger, and that kind of thing. It didn’t go too much into the people of the valley, but it did the Forest Service. Like a dummy I sent this through the channels. It went to the Forest Supervisor; then he sent it to the Region Office. Sooner or later it might have ended up in the Federal Records Center. I have tried to track it down and it is futile. It never got processed and got thrown away. I think every ranger district did the same thing. Somebody decided they’d run out of money and the project was dropped. I’ve got a list of who was ranger there. (There is one posted at the Condon Work Center.)

Charlie Shaw in The Flathead Story includes the ranger lists.

Some of the people I visited with included the following:

Mary Harris. She had a homestead up the road, east of Condon, toward the Swan Mountains. She and her husband were original settlers there. Her husband died and she just continued on. When we came in there as residents at the station she came down and introduced herself. We just developed a real friendship with her. On her 80th birthday, she was going to climb that 70-
foot steel tower, which she did. I figured that was quite a feat. She did it, anyway. I think she was talking to Helen there, when she had decided to go out of the valley during the winters. Helen asked her what she did, and she said, “I take care of old people.” She moved to Missoula and took care of Maclays. They were younger than she was, but she was in better shape than they were. She was just a real sweet person.

HVG: Mary had a garden on her homestead with a high fence around it. She’d get our kids to come up and weed the garden and things like that. She didn’t have a car. She’d walk down to pick up her mail at the ranger station. She’d come down and say, “Let’s go pick huckleberries.” And I’d say okay. I’d take the car and she’d tell me where to go. We’d go and get huckleberries. She could pick more than I could.

BVG: Another one is Ed Beck. Ed was a real special person. I liked him. The county would get with him every year. The loggers who were working in there, they had to pay taxes from that particular area. The county would sic Ed on them, to go get them to pay their taxes. Some of them were pretty rough cases. Old Ed was just as rough as they were. Ed was completely honest. He’d tell them that they were going to pay their tax and that was what they were going to do. He lived not far from the station there. We had a good relationship with Ed.

At the old station, I think the Finlanders were the original settlers in the area. Jalmar Laine had a little to do with the first buildings at the Condon Ranger Station. He became kind of a recluse. They were pretty skilful with what they did. It was the old Finnish immigrants.

We spent a couple of years, living in the ranger’s house. And Herb Styler lived in the house that’s gone, that was up on the hill. The different assistant rangers lived in the Hungry Horse House.

Anyway, Ed cared for his mother there for quite awhile, until she died.

There was Mrs. Strom, and her store. She had the two boys, Uno and Tauno; I think that means one and two in Finnish. I knew them fairly well. They were industrious types. Uno had a sawmill. Uno wasn’t really too bright. He had a pit under the saw. The sawdust would get in there and fill up and the saw would be running through it. So he’d have to get down there with a shovel and clean the sawdust out. Well, Uno didn’t shut the saw off!! In the wintertime, this one time, he had a big heavy jacket on, or a couple of jackets. He got the thing shoveled out clear under the saw. He was under the saw with it roaring around up there working. He accidentally lifted up and the saw caught him and just jammed his face right into the sawdust pile. It didn’t cut his back. It made him mad so he reared up again and it jammed him again. (laughter)

Let’s see, Art and Martha Anderson. She was a school teacher and Art worked for us quite a bit. Real nice people. Tuffy and Leita. Tuffy was a neat guy, an all around good fellow.
Russ and Delores Conkling were real friendly people. It was kind of pathetic. Jim Papke was his son-in-law, married to his daughter. We went to his funeral. They couldn’t even find any pallbearers. Jim asked me if I’d help out. They had been known in the valley there for a long time.

Gene Fox and his wife, Etta. They were in the northern end of the valley then. He was kind of a cowpoke. When there were O-Mok-Sees, he was a bull rider. They got an old Hereford bull. A real complacent beast. Gene was riding the bull and he couldn’t get him to buck. Just things like that.

The Haasch brothers, Harold and Russ, were natives there. They ran the bar room for awhile.

Kauffmans and the Hollopeters were natives. Sadie Kauffman was a sweet little gal. Just real pretty. She made buggy rim rugs, along with Evie and Leona.

The Jettes. They were south a little further. We knew the Jettes quite well. In fact when we left, we had this horse, a nice albino Arabian. We sold the Jette boys the horse for fifty bucks and threw in the saddle.

Jalmar Maki was a log technician. He had the ranch up there where the Cold Creek Road takes off. He sold that to Bill Hearst, a shyster lawyer. I guess Bill is alive yet. Practicing law. We used to have a little difficulty with him. The old ranger station road went through his property, what they called “Bean Town.” It’s Beckville, or whatever it is, right there at the junction. That’s what they lived on, the bunch of loggers in there who weren’t very prosperous. One guy had a house in there that came in two sections. They were about two feet apart. You had to go out of one and into the other. His wife was nagging at him to do something in there, so one evening he just got the chainsaw and cut a big square hole between the two buildings. I think Herb was down there and he said the place was full of chainsaw smoke, but he got the job done.

Anyway, Hearst, the road to the ranger station went through his property there. One of the previous rangers had gotten a formal right of way through it, but they hadn’t registered it and nobody knew where it was. Old Hearst got wind of this and put a barbed wire fence across the road and blocked it off. I just went up and got the border patrol and took them down there, took the fence over and put it in his yard. (laughter) Anyway, I got to digging around up there and I found an old apple box full of records and here was the deed in it. So we went and got the deed registered.

Old Chip Dunlap was essentially crooked, but he was also ambitious. Pretty good logger. He had been an outfitter. It was kind of funny. The locals, when winter came along they usually couldn’t work outdoors. They’d get what they called rocking chair money, their unemployment. Chip wanted to work during the winter, in his logging. So he’d just take a few names down there to the employment office and ask for these guys to go to work for him. So he cut the rocking chair money off and those guys would have to go to work. They didn’t like Chip too
well. He had a son named Wayne. Wayne was married to a gal there, Kathy, I think her name was. She had been one of the Keewaydin girls. Barney Woodhouse at Holland Lake Lodge used to furnish summer entertainment for some of them.

Bud Cheff used to come through there periodically. He lived in the Mission Valley and he would come across the Missions with his stock, and down through Condon and up across the Swan Mountains and out into the Bob Marshall. It was quite an ambitious trip. Old Bud came through there one day. He had been over in the Bob Marshall and hit an early snow. He just about pooped out coming across the mountains there. He came into the station and he was about done for. We fed him a big steak and got him on his way.

Jalmar Laine would come up to the station every once in awhile. We’d check on him and see how he was doing. He lived down on the river and lived all by himself. He did trapping, anything to make a few bucks. He just didn’t have any occupation.

Ray Fenby had a sawmill up north of Salmon Prairie. Ray would buy a few logs from us every once in awhile.

Herb and Dorothy Holmes. Herb was the service manager with Niebold’s Chevrolet, I think, here in Missoula; then his heart went bad. He moved to Condon. We hired him to take care of the vehicle maintenance for the station. He and his wife were just really nice people. They lived down by the Wilhelms. They had a son, Kay and Dorothy, I think, was his wife. He was a teacher. And Robert, his wife was a teacher, too.

Henry Meyer. We hired him. It was amazing. He came to work. It came noon and we sat down to eat lunch. He took this big sack and shook about seven sandwiches out of it! “You know I’m running short up there, of meat,” he’d say. “I got to shoot a bunch of deer and make sandwiches!”

Then there was...if you are going down the valley further, there were Percy and Marguerite Wilhelm, with the sawmill at Lindbergh.

Ting and Dobb Wilhelm. There were a couple of reprobates! (joking) We managed to live with them. They had portable sawmill and they’d buy a few little sales from us every once in awhile. They came into the station there one day and they were both drunk, at the new station. They were looking for trouble and they were going to beat up on my assistant there, Dwight Cook. I know I grabbed a metal chair and told old Dobb, “I’ll knock your head off. If you don’t get out of here, there’s going to be two things happen to you: you’re going to get arrested and you are going to get your head knocked off!”

There was no law enforcement. I didn’t have no law enforcement authority. All I had was a metal chair. If they’d a decided to stay, I’d have lost the fight.

Bayard “Bob” Van Gieson and Helen Van Gieson Interview, OH 422-197, 198, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Buff and Eunice Hultman. Eunice was a high school classmate of mine and we knew her very well. The 33 Bar Dude Ranch. We kind of got crosswise with old Buff there one time. I think they called themselves the American Forestry Association, a group of people that went back into the Bob Marshall and Buff was their outfitter. I think he had something like a hundred and some head of stock and twenty five people. It was a parade. That was before there were limits. He was legal, but one thing he was doing there...their objective was to get from this place to that place as fast as he could. Here were all these tourists. I was the faithful guide and companion there to explain the country and all that to the people, but I still had authority over what he did.

Here was Buff going along, these people trying to get pictures, wheeling around in the saddles. I finally got ticked off about it and told him to slow up a bit and give the people a chance to do their thing. The crew that he had there were kind of testy. This one lady came over to me in the evening and said, “I’m hungry.” And I said, well, go and get something to eat. She said, “Well, I did, but they’d scowl at me and they wouldn’t give me anything.” Boy, we had a showdown right there. I said, “Hulman, that don’t happen out here. If you want to lose your dude rancher’s license, you do that again.” Boy they got the crew out and fed her a real four-course meal, right there. They got interested in what they were doing; they forgot the service they were supposed to provide.

I just was in charge of this particular permit, for this particular occasion. Anyway, we kind of had it out there.

Let’s see... there was Andy and Emma Kopra. They had the garage and service station, there. Bud Powell was my assistant. He was always in a big hurry. He had this Dodge Power Wagon that he drove. It was an awful machine. He got in it that one morning and it had a low tire. We went down there. We drove into the station and Emma was handling the station. He said, “Where’s your air?” and she went, “whoof,” blowing like she was blowing out a match. Bud snorted and he came at her saying, “That alpine old bitch” . . . so much for that.

Bob Seaman, when we needed construction equipment or help we usually went to him.

Warner Lundberg was a school mate of mine, in high school. I knew Warner really well. His in-law, Dick Loepp, here in town, is a photographer. I used to go up and visit Warner later on. I think Warner had about 800 acres in there, just a beautiful place. I figured it would all end up, when Warner died, here would be the subdividers tearing it up. But he had the presence of mind, Dick was telling me, to put a conservation on it where they can’t do that. So that’s great.

When Warner’s dad was killed, there was something kind of hairy that went on there. Warner didn’t want to talk about it and I didn’t press it at all. It was kind of a nasty thing. It had a kind of traumatic effect on Warner. It really hurt Warner, whatever it was.

Bayard “Bob” Van Gieson and Helen Van Gieson Interview, OH 422-197, 198, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Underwoods, I knew very little about them. They had some mountain climbers come in called Underhill that used to go up and chase around in the Mission Mountains. I never met them either.

John and Marie Stark. Marie was Cap Laird’s daughter. John worked for us doing carpentry work. John made rustic furniture. He didn’t think I knew it, but he would go out and steal these juniper trees and cut them off right flush with the ground and then kick duff over the top of them! (laughs) But that was as good a use for them as anything, so I never made any fuss.

Shorty Koessler was around. Shorty used to get drunk and get in his airplane and come up to the airfield at the new station. He’d get me forced into going for a ride with him. I didn’t trust him. He was a good pilot, but he was drunk sometimes, too. I figured every kind of excuse I could think of but I had to go along with him a couple three times. He wanted me to go look at timber was the excuse, but I think he just wanted somebody to go along with him. His wife, at that time, was Barbara Streit, who was also a high school classmate of mine. The Streits were quite influential people. Shorty, he was kind of a special character. He had some good qualities, but then he was kind of a real weird one in other ways. I was in a group with him, the loggers were talking about timber sales or something, and whatever possessed him, I don’t know, but he all of a sudden he just starts peeing on this logger’s boot. And the logger just knocked him flat! Those were the days. We went down to dinner with him one time and had a real nice dinner.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
BVG: Somebody had gotten to him (?) and told him that those trees (along the highway, ponderosa pine) were over-mature. They weren't going downhill; they were over-mature, but still growing. So he came up to me and asked me, “Do you think I ought to cut them?” I said, “You ought to have your head cut off if you cut them! They are beautiful.” I told him, “If you need money, fine, you’ll get a lot of money out of them. You don’t look to me like you need any money.” He didn’t cut them down, I don’t think.

Cap Laird. I had an experience with his operation up there in the Mission Mountains. He built his own trails in there. He was great at hiding them. Well, I found them. Around Crystal Lake, there’s a trail that comes down from Meadow and Bunyan down to Crystal. Just before it reaches Crystal, he took off to the west above the Crystal Lake. As this stream comes down about the middle of Crystal Lake, he had a camp in there. His trail came down. It was a beautiful trail compared to what the Forest Service had there, but he concealed it. Then he went up to High Park Lake and Lost Lake. His trail went back up into the boonies again. There’s a big rock ridge comes down to Crystal Lake towards the west end there. Everybody goes across that and ends up out in the swamp. You can just see a big trail out there. But Cap went right up that rock ridge for probably 200 yards where a horse wouldn’t make a track. Then he took off to Lost Lake and High Park. But he did that to most all of us back in there. He was a good outfitter. Of course, Charles Lindbergh stayed there for awhile and they changed the name of the lake.

Dick Hickey took over Laird’s. I knew Dick really well. We had differences over forest management. Dick was an energetic person. I thought a lot of him.

There was a maintenance man who I don’t know his name. He had a place down on the Holland Lake Road. Not Wiscarson, I don’t think so. Anyway, he was a really reliable person and did his job really well.

Mrs. Lanagan. She didn’t have a husband, but she lived in a little cabin down not too far from Underwoods. It was kind of a run down place, and there she was trying to make a living. Had two kids. Nettie and I don’t know what the other boy’s name was. We’d have road kill down there. There were people, Beesons, were one of them were pretty poor, and Lanagan’s the same way. Somebody would hit a deer on the highway. I always carried a pistol. I would shoot the dang deer and cut its throat, tell the people it was there, and they’d go pick it up.

She’d picked up a deer one day with an old beat up pickup and took it into her place. And here was this game warden. He was a real crank. He followed the blood dripping out of the back of the pickup. It had been hit on the highway. He was going to arrest Mrs. Lanagan. So she said, “Okay. I’ve got two kids here. What are we going to do with them?” The game warden said, “We’ll take them along.” She replied, “No, they have to go to school. You can’t do that.” Finally, he threw up his hands and left. Anyway, he got with me and said, “If you shoot any of those
deer I’m going to arrest you.” I told him in no uncertain terms was he going to arrest me. “We’ll see about that,” I said. I about got in trouble, too.

At the Forest Service cookhouses, they’d been shooting the bears because they were pests. “Well,” the warden said, “boy, you don’t want to shoot any bears up there.” One night, this cook slept in the back of the cookhouse in a narrow, board wall there, between it and the garbage cans outdoors. This bear came over and just at dusk got in the garbage cans. He heard him. I got a flashlight and a pistol and I figured I’d burn him on the shoulder with a pistol and maybe get rid of him that way. We tried to chase him away. I got the flashlight out there wobbling around with this pistol, shot, and I killed the bear just deader than anything. It was a .45 pistol. There must have been twenty people there in the station, excited about the dead bear. I figured that the game warden was going to find out about this and I said, “I’m in trouble.” Some of the employees wanted his paws, or his skull, or his hide. I said, “Okay, you guys take him apart, but you get rid of the evidence.” So they did.

I traveled quite a bit in the Missions, there, and I think on three occasions I saw grizzlies. This one where we were was named Grizzly Lake. I think it was Styler and Lowary and I were up there. We were trying to find if it might be smart to build a trail in that area. It turned out it wasn’t. We camped on a little cliff up above this Grizzly Lake. It wasn’t a lake; really, it was a big, old wide-spreading stream down below that. We were right on the edge of this cliff, maybe twenty feet high or so. In the morning we could hear this commotion down below, just a whole bunch of smacking and rolling around. We looked over the edge and here was this grizzly taking his morning bath, just having a ball. Swatting the water and rolling in it and snorting.

Lowary said, “He’ll probably come up around this way and I’ll set the camera on the tripod and I’ll get his picture.” Sure enough he came up where we thought he might. Lowary clicked the camera. The click of the camera scared the bear and he just upended and headed out across country. He yelled at him when he got maybe fifty yards away. He left the ground I’ll bet you four feet and turned around in mid-air and started back toward us. Here, the tallest tree was about three feet tall. We were real quiet. He decided to go away again. Here Lowary had the camera with the cable release on it and he still jiggled the picture. Anyway, that’s the story. I had seen them before, but it was always a thrill. They react differently than black bears. All that I’ve ever seen. I worked in Glacier Park as a trail foreman and we saw them quite often. They’d always run from us. I guess there’s one they call a dominant male and he’s not going to do that. The ones that I saw were always ready to run.

That’s about it for my list of people.

Fred Matzner followed me at Condon. He kind of got crosswise with a lot of people. I knew him pretty well and it surprises me that he got that way. He had his ideas about a lot of things.

When I was there, during the bark beetle years, they had given up on the idea of spraying. These beasties, the bugs, have a biotic potential. They can multiply at a tremendous rate. Their

Bayard “Bob” Van Gieson and Helen Van Gieson Interview, OH 422-197, 198, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
predators multiply at a slower rate. They eventually catch up and they wiped those beetles out. But when you spray, you set everything back to zero again. If you do it often enough, the predators never catch up with the bugs. Spraying, you never can get to every place. You’ve got south slopes, elevation differences. But beetles are only susceptible for a little avenue of time and you can never get them.

They tried cutting trap trees to try to suck the beetles into them and then log the trap trees off. Often as not they took out the trap trees and it just accentuated the epidemic.

Photo discussion:

People at the station: When I first came up there, they had no preparations at all. The logging came on real big. This bark beetle epidemic went on for several years. They could see the need for some pretty good roads there in the Swan Valley. They got the Bureau of Public Roads to build the Kraft Creek and the Cold Creek Roads. As you drive them, you’ll see that the first part of them is pretty well engineered roads. They were built primarily to access these beetle infected areas.

The thing just kind of snowballed. Here was the old station. The office was a two-room affair (he shows pictures). The dispatcher there was Dick Kent. When we first moved in there, Dick slept in the office. The door was bolted horizontally onto the wall and, when Dick went to sleep, he pulled the door down, kind of like a Murphy bed or whatever. When it came time for him to go to work, he folded the door up.

I was a ranger there and the assistant rangers were Bud Powell, and his wife, Kat (Kathy), and Kelsey Smith was the next one, his wife’s name was Eve, and the third one was Dwight Cook, and his wife’s name was Ellen. Herb Styler was the alternate, and his wife, Leona. The dispatcher in this picture was Chuck Samuelson, and his wife, Elaine. He might be one to interview. He’s pretty – for good reason – he’s against some of the things the Forest Service is doing, some of the environmental things. It might be a revelation to hear what he has to say. The clerk was Dick Kent, and then Fred Rogers. We had a string of them that didn’t pan out. The cook was Dick Williams. His wife was Alta. They were real nice people. The head scaler was Lee Pope. The packer was a kid named Chuck Kern. (sp?) He was one that went up with us when we went a burned down the lookout list. We burned Holland Lookout. I’ve got a picture of it. The trail foreman was Art Findlay; he just worked part time there. A guy that was kind of a character, I never met him, but he was the alternate ranger before Herb, was Scoop Scovel. Scoop had two of the orneriest kids that ever lived!

Station animals – we had four horses. They were Kid and Gandy, and I can’t remember the others. We had six mules. We used them mainly as one long string. Mules are strange beasts. We used to come out of the Fatty Lake area up there. The trail would somehow or other, there was a tree in the middle and the trail branched and went around it. This one mule, every time
we’d go by there, he’d stick his head out. His rope was tied on to the next mule. And here they’d wrap around that tree and break the whole string apart. Every time.

We had our own horse. Clipper, the albino Arabian.

Lookouts. The active ones at that time were Cooney and Elbow and Jim. This Holland Peak, which had been damaged real badly by a storm - and they were abandoning them anyway - and Fatty on the north end. Then they had the 70-foot tower there at the station. We burned Holland and Fatty. Chuck and I burned Fatty and liked to froze to death burning that thing down. We took horses. It was just a heck of a blizzard going on and we just about turned back, then figured, ah, let’s go ahead and do it. We got a whole bunch of debris and set a fire in the floor in the middle of the lookout. The windows were, some of them, broken out. We put the shutters down. This fire got going and we got warmed up by that. But of course here’s all this smoke circulating around down in there. The fire finally burned a hole in the floor. A draft from the blizzard went by, it would puff up a big gust of fire then suck it down underneath. Pretty soon the whole building caught on fire and we had to leave.

Fatty was built flat on the ground. It was on Fatty peak or Fatty mountain. I’m a little fuzzy on the name of it. It was one of the highest pinnacles in that area. It covered part of the Swan Lake area as well as Condon.

(indecipherable)

Jim Lookout, we replaced it when I was there. It was quite a feat. We carried all the materials in on a mule string. We had twenty foot timbers we had to take in there. Carried them on two mules using lumber bunks. Just sawbuck saddles. We learned something interesting there. Some mules are pushers and others are pullers. If you mix them up you get a windmill. The windmill with twenty-foot timbers on it is kind of a bad windmill. You try to catch them and change them around, reverse them and everybody is happy. It was a fifty foot tower and it had poles for corner supports. The new one had treated timbers. I imagine it has been destroyed by now.

Schools. Smith Flats was in operation.

HVG: It was quite a thing for us to come from town schools out there. The kids would go down and the bus would take the kids from our end of the valley down to the school. Here our boys were building fires down there at the school in the stove because the teacher came from down there. Our two boys were nine and ten and they were building fires down there.

BVG: They’d go down to the Swan River and get water in a bucket. They had a pack rat that would come up in the corner of the building during roll call in the morning. He’d answer roll call.
HVG: The boys thought it was wonderful. They loved being there at Condon. They liked being out in the woods. They’d go camping every once in awhile. They’d go out until the wolves would start howling and then they’d come home.

BVG: We never heard any stories about wolves. Well, we heard one, about the big one at Swan Lake. He was stuff and displayed. We did hear wolves. We’d sit out on the porch in the evening out there at the old station. You’d hear the coyotes all howling, yipping around. Then this big old bay would come from a wolf and all the coyotes would just quiet down. They were impressed.

For high school, the kids had to go early in the morning to Seeley Lake and take a bus to Missoula. It was the longest bus route in the United States. It was something like five hours that they were traveling.

HVG: We moved into town when Robert was a freshman in high school. I stayed in town with the kids. We’d go home to Condon on weekends. Then Lee went to Willard School, because Rusty (?) wasn’t in school yet. A lot of people would send their kids down to stay with somebody, and they had to stay up in the valley. We could have put Bob out to his aunt and uncle here in town, but we decided it probably was better if I came into town with him.

BVG: There were some incidents that took place up there that might be of interest up there. The Woodhouses had Holland Lake Lodge. Woody, the son, he kind of served as an outfitter for the group. He would take people over Gordon Pass back into the Bob Marshall elk hunting. If anything went wrong in the valley, if people got in trouble some way, they would call the Forest Service. Here we got a call that Woody had gotten injured back in the Bob Marshall, about twenty miles back in. This was about 2 o’clock in the afternoon that this guy came back out. He said Woody was unconscious as far as they knew and he’d had a back injury. He’d gotten tangled up some way with his horse. Nobody was there to help. No search and rescue set up at all.

So I got Dick Peltier the packer. He and I rounded up a couple of horses. We called ahead — we had a doctor in Kalispell who would respond to any injuries. He’d ride horseback with us and whatnot. We had the REA line then, for the phone. He found out it was a twenty-mile ride in the middle of the night and he decided he had some real urgent cases he had to take care of. No way was he coming out there. We described what had probably happened to Woody. So the doctor said, “Well, you could put him in the saddle and get on the horse behind him and hold him on.” And we thought, “Where in the hell did you go to medical school? Put a guy with a broken back in a saddle?” So we parted on unfriendly terms. Peltier and I loaded up and headed back in there. We got back to where Woody’s camp was in the middle of the night. Horses, they can find their way pretty good. It is surprising too: when you get out like that, the starlight — there was no moon — the starlight alone, you get accustomed to it and you can actually see reasonably well.
Here was these two guys that Woody had out there on his trip. They had put him in a wet sleeping bag and built a fire. He was probably four feet from the fire so it didn’t do any good. They set him up that way. I went over and looked at him with a flashlight. Man, his head, from his nose clear over to his ear, was just a big old purple bulge, and kind of just a slit for his eye. I figured he was a goner. We didn’t dare move him or anything. I was looking in his ear to see if there might be a skull fracture and there would be blood in there. I was down there with a flashlight peering around.

Woody came out of it, looked up me and said, “Hiya, Van,” just like we’d met on a street corner. I couldn’t believe it. Just like that. He obviously had some kind of damage that was pretty serious. We talked to him for awhile and finally got him up on his feet. He was wobbling around. We walked him around a little bit. We figured well, he looked like he could stand, maybe we could get him up on a horse and he could ride. We thought about riding double, but all of our horses were kind of skittish. We didn’t want to get bucked off, with him, too. So I figured I could walk along beside him and if he fell off I would try to catch him. We went about a mile that way. It was just impossible to do. So he figured he could hold on. He held on all right. We really legged it there getting back to town. We got back around nine or ten in the morning. They had an ambulance waiting. Poor old Woody’s mom. I didn’t clean him up or anything. She just about died when she saw him. As far as I know, he came out of it. He had some bones broken around his eye cup there. They took him to the hospital and he came out of it.

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
Then another one, this Gene Prang, was lost up there in the Mission Mountains. Search and rescue was the Sheriff’s responsibility, but nothing . . . we just hadn’t had any experiences like that. . .

Bob: This Maclean was the sheriff. He was a serious alcoholic and he didn’t know what to do. The word got out that Prang was lost out there. In fact, the Associated Press had picked it up. They were launching bulletins in the paper. People were showing up there at the ranger station, just really top notch people who could have participated in a search. They were volunteering for it. But I couldn’t do anything. I’d tell them to go see the sheriff. But he wasn’t doing anything. So it went on a couple three days like that. Just the time we should have been out there looking.

I finally told Maclean to get off his duff and do something, or else I was going to take it over. He told me to take it over. In the meantime he sent what they called the sheriff’s posse up there. They were going to search for this Prang. They were a bunch of nice guys. Nice fat palamino horses and nice fat guys. Anyway, we got a radio call at about 10 o’clock at night. They had showed up at Crystal Lake. They had found their way in there. They didn’t have any food. They didn’t have any feed for the horses. Didn’t have any map. Didn’t know anything, just, here we are.

Anyway, [Dick] Peltier and I loaded up some stock. We loaded up the mule there and two horses. We ended up in the middle of the night in there at Crystal Lake. The poor old horses were in there whinnying. We had nose bags and oats. We went and fed their horses and fed them.

The next morning, the sun came up and they had come in at night. They looked up there and saw all these huge mountain peaks. My God. Anyway, the guy came over, the boss, and he said, we aren’t equipped to pull into country like this. I said, “We don’t want to look for you. You better get the heck out of here.” So they left.

We got ahold of the National Guard. They had a camp set up. They had a big raft with a motor on it. We motored up and down Crystal Lake in it, taking people back and forth. We search the area up around High Park. We knew he had gone – we’d found his car over at Beaver Creek – we knew where he had gone in. We searched around High Park and around Lost Lake, and Angels Bathing Pool, and some in Beaver Creek.

It was kind of interesting there at High Park. There was a mamma grizzly up there on the north side. She was waiting to hibernate. I guess they wait until a snow storm comes along. She was sitting right where they needed to go through this narrow spot to do their searching. She wouldn’t let them through. Every time they’d show up there, she’d rear up and chase them out.
Just like a needle in a hay stack. They found his car keys right up there right near High Park Lake. Just the whole Mission Mountains and here’s the car keys. That’s all we ever found. He was a neatknick. He was one of these people that didn’t leave any debris or anything which was great. But not in that case. We didn’t find a thing.

Then later on, the dog showed up there at our camp at Crystal Lake. I tried to catch him. Anyway, the dog ran on down to Lindbergh Lake. They got the dog and brought it up. Lassie syndrome, we thought we’d take the dog out and he’d find his master. Of course, that didn’t work.

Herb Styler ended up with the dog. But we never found him. Laurie Harvey, he’s a forester for the Northern Pacific. He took it upon himself to search up there every once in awhile. A trail comes down from Beaver Creek, down to the Jocko, that road. Harvey figured maybe the guy came out that way. He went down, there’s a road that takes off there by a big irrigation ditch. He was ramming around in there and found a blanket. It was an unusual blanket. It was actually a belt from a paper mill. This Prang was known to have had a blanket like that. I guess they got Prang’s mother, brought her out there, and she saw that blanket and said, “That’s his blanket.”

Prang had two (guns), a .22 and a .44. They never found those. The thing I knew about, there was two renegade Indians running around up in that country. They had killed somebody about the same time, same general area. I’m thinking that what happened to him is those two found him camped along that road that he’d come out on, and he was probably looking for a ride out of there. They scragged him and hid his body. But that’s my idea. Anyway, Laurie Harvey was the one that got in there.

There was another guy named Nash; he was one of the smokejumpers out here. He searched around up there. We took the next sheriff that succeeded Maclean and took him in there with his crew, and searched. It was futile. We didn’t turn up nothing.

I’m thinking that he’s down there in the Jocko somewhere. There wasn’t really any other speculation.

Another thing that just turned me off completely was the Associated Press. Those guys, they showed up at the Lindbergh Lake Lodge. A lot of booze and comfortable surroundings. That’s as far as they ever got. They had countrywide news reports on what was going on up there. They hadn’t the foggiest of what was going on, really. Never showed up, stayed drunk most of the time. The funny part of it, my packer, Peltier, was bringing supplies into us at Crystal Lake. They asked him, “What’s going on up there.” So Peltier came over to me. He said he didn’t know what to tell them. I said, “Hey, lay it on them. They’ll eat it up.” He had us in quicksand and fighting snakes. They reported the whole thing. It didn’t make any difference to them. The public would buy the story, so what the heck.
We had one other thing that kind of ticked me off. Up by Skylark Lake. There was a guy logging up there. Slack was his name. A forest fire started not too far from his logging job, back in the boonies there. We probably spent twenty thousand bucks putting the thing out. It was a real hot one. I got to looking around. You always check those to see what the cause is. Here was a dead deer up there with a couple of steaks cut off of the ham. Somebody had set a fire there and evidently cooked these steaks. Here, it's the middle of the summer. Hey, I landed on Slack. I told him it looked like one of his crew had been up there and done that. I was pretty mad. I think I was staring at this guy. All of a sudden I noticed him vanish back into the timber. Slack said, “Well, I hired him on a couple of days ago.” “Before this fire?” I asked him. “Yeah,” he said. I told him, “Let’s go get that guy.” We went and drug him out of the woods. Sure enough he was the one. He’d shot this deer and cooked the steaks and left the fire burning. So there was two people involved there, the FBI and the Fish and Game. So I called the FBI. I’d just as soon see him stuck away somewhere. So I called the Fish and Game. They were pretty busy and couldn’t do anything about it. So the guy gets off Scot-free.

There was no law enforcement there in those days, really. I couldn’t arrest him. This same guy, I ran into him again. He’d been in – he and his buddy – drinking. They met this girl; I guess it was at Swan Lake. They decided, in the morning, they were going to go fishing. They were going to go up to Rumble Lake. It was not an easy trip. Anyway, here’s the girl in a dress and party shoes. They had a .33 rifle. I don’t know what they figured they’d do with that. Anyway, the girl couldn’t keep up with them when they went up to the lake, so they gave her the rifle and they headed up to the lake. They showed up to the station, saying this girl was lost. We had to go find the girl. The description was, “Well she weighs about 200 pounds. She has this black dress on, a party dress.” We were looking all over the place. Finally, I was down there by the Rumble Creek Road. Anyway, she had come out. She still had the rifle. We got to talking with her. She said she’d pooped out. She just figured she’d spend the night out there, but the mosquitoes were just chewing her up terrible. So she’s pulled her dress up over her head.

HVG: (on mosquitoes) I came from Saco, and they are a lot worse up there at Saco. They’d bite me but they never left any marks on me.

BVG: Another thing: the sawmills that they had up there. Marshall Gray, he had a mill there that finally burned out. He went to Canada, building mills for Japanese outfits. He and his wife and their family are around Bozeman or Belgrade. Marshall and his wife went to college at the same time Helen and I did over at Bozeman. Helen knew Ann really well. We date really way back. We knew him when they had the mill at Seeley. We’d visit with them every once in a while. Marshall died here a while ago. He was very active in Habitat for Humanity. He was nominated as Citizen of the Year here in Montana as a result of his activities.

Ann is still alive.

[Photo discussion starts]
See notebook for photo captions:

Helen VG, Bob VG and Chuck Kern (sp?) took pictures while burning the Holland Lookout. Helen was wearing a flight jacket.

Jim Lookout. Bob VG and two others went up to stay at Jim to cruise timber.

Winter photo of old Condon Ranger Station. B&W and color of the same thing. The only picture of the old tower in his collection. Taken from the upper story of the ranger’s residence.

Photo taken from the tower. Office, warehouse, hay shed, machine or mechanic shop. The office is gone now.

Photo showing the Alternate ranger’s residence, and the house from Hungry Horse was thirty five or forty yards down the hill from that, in a little swale, away from the tower.

1957 photo of . . .

I will copy these and scan them and bring them back to Bob.

New Condon Work Center crew photo. Herb, Dick, etc. and dog Rocky. Negative #31251 “overhead at Condon Ranger Station”

The Forest Service loses stuff about as soon as they get it. –Bob

Sign photo releases.

Herb Styler and Dick Williams cruising timber, up on Beaver Creek looking back into the Missions. The road is closed off now. Early prototype of snowmachine. Tucker.

Packer Dick Peltier and mule string. Bob said he never took a picture of Tuffy with mules.

No sand and gravel for footings at Jim Creek LO, and hauled it up in milk cans . . . carried cement and sand and gravel in milk cans.

Bob got best of show for one of his photos last year at the fair in Missoula.

He said he could get us some more photos.

Art Anderson worked on the project of getting footings done at Jim LO.

Infra red and other “for the hell of it” photos. Scenic shots above Turquoise, white bark pine, taken in the 1950s.
Thad Lowary – “The FS lost most of his collection of photos at the Regional Office.”

Granite Pk, out of Billings. Bob and Thad, drilled register box on top of the peak. Somebody took it, removed it. Wilderness. Lowary and a guy name Miller. Taken with a 4x5 camera in the Beartooth Mountains.

Lowary above Turquoise Lake, practicing climbing.

Dick Peltier and Chuck Samuelson above Turquoise Lake, between Turquoise and Lace Lake.

Rumble Lake photos.

[End of Interview]