Bob Brown: This is Bob Brown and I’m interviewing former Lieutenant Governor Karl Ohs today. Karl was involved in an incident in 1996 near Jordan, Montana, involving the Freemen, an extremist group who attempted to form their own country, I guess, essentially. Lieutenant Governor Ohs was instrumental in working out a resolution to that conflict. He’s going to tell us that story today.

Karl Ohs: Thank you Bob. I’ve had the opportunity to share parts of it. I’ll try to share it all in one story here to get it. It was March of 1996 as I remember, near the end of March. I was sitting here in the kitchen one evening and I got a phone call. It was a strange voice on the other side. It said, “This is such and such from the FBI. Do you know anything about what’s going on in Jordan?” Of course I just barely heard anything. I said, “No, I know nothing.” As the conversation went on, it became clear that my name had clearly come up in relation to what was going on as the Freemen Affair.

What had happened, the FBI had arrested two of the principals—LeRoy Schweitzer and a guy named [Daniel] Peterson—in a sting operation to bring down this Freemen operation that had moved from first Roundup and then to Garfield County near Brusett. They were doing some funny things with checks and money. The Treasury Department, and of course the worrisome of just having a militant group like that out there, brought the arrest of the two principals.

When that happened, the rest of the neighbors around there, some who truly were Freemen—some were more sympathizers and some were just scared—all retreated to what they call “The Ranch,” the Clark Ranch, that became known as this standoff, which lasted for 81 days. Of course I had no idea why I would get a call from the FBI. Come to find out at the time, there was a guy—one of my best friends and still is—working for me. His daughter went off to school in Helena and married a young man who was an airplane mechanic. He was [William] Stanton. Stantons of course were neighbors and his dad was one of the original Freemen.

They had gone up to the farm to help try and keep the farm. When the standoff began, they were in the compound with the rest of them. The FBI, in this attempt to avoid a Ruby Ridge and Waco incident like we’d seen before, decided that the tactical team wasn’t necessarily going to be the lead. The negotiating team would have more influence on decisions made than tactical. So they were looking for what they call TPI: Third Party Intermediaries. That would be family members, somebody that knew somebody else inside that they could try to start and crack things up before it got totally out of hand.
My name had come up with some other legislators who are, I guess, more on the conservative side. I was befuddled why; I wasn’t necessarily known as one of that kind. It was obviously because of this young lady that I knew very well. She was like a second daughter to me. Obviously she had given the name out of somebody that they thought they could talk to. Butch, her dad, and I thought, “We’re going to run up and see her anyway. Let’s go up there and we’ll talk to her for a few days and see if we can’t get her out to come on home.” Little did we know. So we jumped in his pickup and drove to Billings, thinking, “Well, the FBI wanted to meet us in Billings.” They said to meet them in Billings before we went in.

We went to the Sheridan Hotel and saw an awful lot of people around. There were way more than I thought there should be. Come to find out, they were mostly FBI agents. They were checking us out to make sure that we were capable of even going in there. So we drove on up that next day. We drove on into the compound to see Val, his daughter. As I remember, it was not too unlike driving into a lot of ranches in the middle of the afternoon. There was little activity. There were people carrying guns around. It wasn’t something that stuck out to me as totally—it was a little nerve-racking. It wasn’t totally out of the ordinary. It was more so than you’d imagine. It was like driving in the yard and there were a bunch of people around.

Then after we started conversations, it became very clear that these people were truly—there was trouble. They were truly agitated. Something had to change. There was something going to happen. Luckily I was able to bring the FBI before anyone asked us or set us down for a two or three hour interview to see who we could bring out. Luckily, I was able to bring out a list of demands that they wanted. It was the first time they’d ever seen anything like that in the first couple of days. There were ten demands they wanted.

BB: This was the result of your first trip into the compound?

KO: Yes. It was probably the second trip. I think we went in the first night and then came back in the second night. It was probably the second trip.

BB: Now Karl, these people who were in there wanted to talk to someone of authority. The idea was that you were a state representative at the time. They felt they needed to talk to some kind of an elected official. So you got over to Billings and the FBI worked with you a little bit. They were satisfied that you could maybe help them with this. So you went in and brought back these ten demands, which was really the first time any important communication had taken place.

KO: That’s correct. They did. They wanted somebody with a title. I was a freshman legislator. I had a pretty good title. Nonetheless, I think I had some other qualifications that started to build that trust relationship. I was raised in eastern Montana. I was a farm boy. Edwin Clark and I were about the same age. When things got tough, we could always talk about horses, cows, and sheep.
BB: Edwin Clark was the fellow whose ranch these guys had made into their compound.

KO: That’s correct. So we had some other things we could relate to.

BB: You didn’t know him before this incident, but you had a similar enough background that you connected with him well.

KO: Yes, and I was a legislator. The one thing they wanted, the ten things they demanded was that they wanted this so called “grand jury.” First, that doesn’t sound odd. Their idea of a grand jury was quite a lot different than your and my idea of a grand jury. So as a legislator I thought, “Well maybe we can figure out some sort of thing that will satisfy them just to get this thing cooled off a little bit.” I talked to [Speaker of the House] John Mercer a few times on the phone and said, “We’ll need some more people in here.” So we went and found three more legislators, two Democrats and two Republicans. Dick Knox, your uncle, was one of them. John Johnson from Glendive was another. Joe Quilici from Butte was also there. So they agreed to come up and meet with them. That was really the first—

BB: So they went in to the compound with you and met with these fellows?

KO: This was about a week later, yes. It was the first time that we started some communication going. I would go in every four or five days. Any time there was a new initiative, they would send me in to introduce whatever was coming in, whether it would be these legislators, John Connor, the attorney from the Department of Justice; there were various ones.

BB: Did John go in there with you?

KO: Oh, yes. He went all the way down to (unintelligible).

BB: He was some kind of a well-known—

KO: I was kind of the person that would be the introduction person just because we had this kind of relationship.

BB: They regarded themselves as a separate political entity. They regarded these things as actual negotiations between—they call themselves the “Justus Township.” They were the officials of the Justus Township. It was a sort of one government negotiating with another. That’s how they viewed it.

KO: I would say that’s pretty accurate. Some of them believed that more than others. Some of them were more crooks looking for a hideout. Some of them were truly believers.
BB: I don’t want to get you off your narrative here, but I’m curious to know, and maybe this will come out, who the principal characters were. You mentioned Edwin Clark. I want to know how they came to be in this location and how they formed the Justus Township.

KO: It was interesting for me. I told you that I thought everything I ever learned in my life was for this moment. At the time just prior to this, I worked for the Montana Department of Agriculture as a peer counselor for people who were having trouble with finance during the ‘80s. You remember the Farm Crisis of the ‘80s. So I had a little experience working with people who had financial trouble. Really this in a lot of ways was an offshoot of some of that. The Clarks had made some bad decisions, business decisions, in the ‘80s like many of us did. They were unwilling to admit it. Of course we all like to blame somebody.

So it’s easy to blame the bank or a nameless, faceless government for all your troubles. Then you’re not responsible for anything. They’re responsible for all your faults. So they kind of went down that path. In many ways, it was similar to the crisis of the ‘80s. That’s what started it. The difference is that they took a turn at their rage, anger, and feeling of injustice. They took the path of least resistance. In walked a guy that was very charismatic and smart that says, “I have all your answers.” His name was LeRoy Schweitzer. He said, “I can fix this. All you have to do is not pay your taxes. I’ve got a way to show you how to do it. I’ll even hold classes.” They had classes. They had a classroom. They had people come from all over Montana to take these classes on how to avoid this stuff. That’s what really got—

BB: So Edwin Clark had been foreclosed on.

KO: Yes.

BB: And so this was his way of keeping the ranch?

KO: That’s right.

BB: He followed this advice.

KO: And his family, his dad too. They were all in that same position. There’s one other little side to this story that probably needs to get mentioned. In Garfield County, a lot of people are related. Some of the elected officials were related. It was kind of an old family feud that had been going on for years and years and years. There was a little agitation there that was real or imagined, I don’t know. There were certainly some family issues going on at the same time that created this terrible rage in these folks. I remember standing out there with legislators talking to Edwin. He was so full of emotion, he couldn’t talk. He would just cry about this whole affair of losing, how unjust everything was.

BB: Because one of his neighbors was going to end up with his ranch and he resented that deeply?
KO: It goes back to family issues I think. Nonetheless, anybody who has had financial trouble faces things. They were really vulnerable to a guy by the name of LeRoy Schweitzer. He was the stimulus that created this. That’s kind of how it started. They were in Roundup and had moved to Jordan to the Clark ranch and that’s where this whole thing took off.

BB: Do you understand—what was the concept that Schweitzer peddled to Clark?

KO: I couldn’t even begin to tell you. I’ve spent hours and hours—and the commercial code, the Bible. They have about six documents that they would just fly through and try to prove to you that this was right. I listened, but it meant nothing to me. Then if you added enough Latin to it, you had to be right.

BB: So they made the case to these desperate people that the government didn’t have the legitimate authority to foreclose on their ranch. That was really the bottom line.

KO: Eventually it got carried to prove that the governor didn’t have the legitimacy to do anything. You could separate yourself from the country. It went so far as that you had a right to do whatever you wanted to. It went beyond even the ranch. That’s where everybody else started coming in. Originally it was kind of a farm thing. Then all these other characters started showing up. This movement was kind of around the country. This was pretty exciting. These Russell Landers, Dale Jacobi; they all started showing up because this was what they wanted. They thought, “Boy, we’ve got some people ready to fight. We’re ready to succeed from the union.”

BB: So when this got into the news, they ended up—several of these folks that didn’t have any connection with Edwin Clark and the foreclosure and that sort of thing—driving up to Jordan and coming into Justus Township.

KO: I’m not even sure how the word got spread. I think even before they moved to Jordan, they were moving to Montana.

BB: Can you tell a little bit about Landers and Jacobi?

KO: I don’t know.

BB: There was some woman who was kind of a mysterious character involved in this too.

KO: There were characters. Dale Jacobi was in Canada. He was a former police officer. He was a very angry man. Russell Landers from South Carolina, I never knew the man very well. He was pretty much just a troublemaker and a loud mouth, in my opinion. There was a guy by the name of Rodney Skurdal, who was probably the most feared just because of his size and the way he looked. He was a marine. He had been a marine and in a lot of things. He was a big man.
People were really afraid of him. He’d walk into a public office and people were really afraid of him. Later I’ll tell a story where he wasn’t quite as scary as you might think he was.

So there were a number of characters. I think that’s an important point to make. Freeman would like to say “free man” like we all do; that means just out of control people. It’s like anything else. Each individual had a reason that they were there. Most of them were different. They’d come together because they felt some injustice had been done and they wanted to blame somebody. It’s easy to blame a nameless, faceless government. All you needed was that stimulus, somebody to have the charisma and the smarts to say, “Follow me. I’ll show you a different way to do this.” That’s kind of the scenario.

BB: So when you went in and you met these people, you negotiated with the people that you’ve just mentioned. Did you negotiate with them on an equal basis? Did they all seem to be equally in charge?

KO: Certainly there was a power vacuum there because the principal had been arrested. LeRoy Schweitzer and a guy name Daniel Peterson, I believe, were arrested. There was really a power vacuum. That was part of the trick. It wasn’t one of the first things that the FBI asked if we could do, is try to figure out who was becoming the leader. That was crucial in getting this thing solved peacefully is who we had to deal with. There was certainly a power vacuum in there. It was a struggle through most of the time that I went in and out of there. I was trying to figure out the leadership and who was going to be the leader, the new leader, now that the main one was gone.

So it was Edwin’s place. It was his ranch. He would have been the natural leader. Edwin was not really militant in mind enough for some of those people in there. It was always this struggle. We did a lot of little things to see if we couldn’t figure out—I’ll tell you a funny one. When we first went in there the first couple of times, everybody smoked cigarettes and smoked a lot. After a while, cigarettes became infrequent. There weren’t many around. So one of the tricks that one of the FBI agents came up with was, “Let’s bring in two packs of cigarettes and throw one down on the table. You light a cigarette and pass it around. Let’s see if we can figure out how this works and figure out who is taking leadership.” That was a little trick.

BB: Who is taking control of the cigarettes, yes.

KO: It didn’t work but I thought of a better idea. Let’s just set cigarettes right out the gate and they’ll just follow us out the gate. There were always little things we were trying to do to figure out who the leadership was. It wasn’t until the very end that Edwin finally said, “I’m taking leadership. My family isn’t going to die here.” That was at the end of the standoff. It finally happened. So that was always the struggle. Most of the time my role was negotiator, trying to get the demands out, and introducing other people who wanted to come in.

BB: They were all armed?

Karl Ohs Interview, OH 396-045, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
KO: I guess so. I never really paid that terrible much attention to it. I guess they were armed. I’ve been asked about it, but it was something that never really overwhelmed me. I never thought—

BB: You must have felt somewhat uneasy.

KO: Oh, there were times. Most of the time, they were glad to have somebody to talk to and somebody that they could vent to. I’ve learned one thing about negotiations. For every time period that you’re away, venting is a direct proportion of it. If I was away for a week, I’d have to listen to hours and hours of venting. If I was gone for a few days, it wasn’t as bad. I’d spend more time just listening to them ramble and vent their anger. It’s a big part of any negotiation to just be able to sit there and take that. It was a big part of it. Finally after a couple of hours of that, you’d be able to sit down and start talking about things that mattered. So that first month or so was pretty much just back and forth taking the initiatives, keeping contact, trying to figure out leadership, and push leaders ahead, introduce new people. We had this team of legislators come in who were trying to figure out this grand jury thing. There was really nothing we could do within the law. We talked to the governor. There was nothing that he was comfortable with that would really work.

BB: This was when [Marc] Racicot was governor.

KO: Yes. In my mind, I thought we should just figure out something. There was really nothing we could do. So that kind of went by the wayside.

BB: When you say grand jury, these guys had in mind that there would be some kind of a jury that would determine their innocence before any charges were filed?

KO: Yes. They always had this thing called “the grand jury.” It was to redress grievances. This grand jury was a peer. So when they said “peer” to people who believed the same philosophy they did, of course then you’d be able to be acquitted of whatever there was. The other thing they did was, their idea was that every elected official needed to have a bond. If you’re an elected official, you were bonded. If you didn’t do right as an elected official, people would put liens on your bond. If you had enough liens on your bond, then you couldn’t be an elected official anymore. They did that.

That’s where some of those stories about putting liens on people and all that stuff came about because that was their idea of how it should be run. Getting down to the story a little bit, this was kind of going on back and forth. We really weren’t making any solid progress. We were probably in the 40-some. I had made numerous trips. All together I made 19 different trips inside. Finally there was political pressure building to end this thing from the president on down. This couldn’t go on forever. Yet there was this terrible need to not make it something like Ruby Ridge or Waco happen again, too. There was a lot of pressure building. As I said
before, it was interesting that the negotiating team had the lead role in this case. I got real close to that crew.

BB: Who were the negotiating team? The FBI people?

KO: Yes.

BB: So you confer with them?

KO: Yes, absolutely. My tightrope was to maintain the credibility on both sides. Certainly my oath of office and everything, I will protect the constitution. On the other hand, if I was going to be in the middle, I had to protect the rights of what these people had to say too. You kind of had to walk that fine line, staying in the middle even where you didn’t know where the middle was sometimes. You had to keep the confidence. As soon as you fell off one side or the other, the confidence was going to be gone. You tried to walk that fine line. Letting everybody know exactly where you stood was important. I was very honest with the FBI. I said, “I’ll work with you. Don’t tell me things that aren’t going to happen.” I told the same thing to the Freemen. I was trying to play it down the middle.

BB: You didn’t want to indicate to the Freemen something that the FBI wasn’t going to... you wanted to make sure that you offered them something that was real.

KO: Yes, everybody fulfilled that obligation pretty well. It was just a matter of trying to stay credible. It was a hard line to walk. All you could do was listen.

BB: Now, just to help us understand here, which I think we pretty much do, was a fair-sized ranch several sections in size?

KO: I suppose.

BB: The Freemen were holed up in the ranch house and some adjacent buildings. There was a lane, half a mile long or something, that led to where the FBI were and where this ranch house was. So when you say you’d go into the compound, you’d go down that lane. Of course, many of us remember on national news, because this of course was a national news story, this mysterious man on horseback that was riding down this muddy lane toward this ranch house off in the distance. Of course that was you. It wasn’t known that it was you until well into this thing, maybe even after it was over.

KO: Yes, it was one of those things that kind of got blown out of proportion I suspect. It was getting near the end and political pressure was building to get this thing ended. Still this power vacuum existed. This Russell Landers wanted to be the leader. Of course we all trusted Edwin. He had made a bad turn, but he had a good heart. All of a sudden for about two weeks we hadn’t heard anything from Edwin. We hadn’t heard a word.

Karl Ohs Interview, OH 396-045, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
BB: You’d been in and out, but you hadn’t seen him?

KO: No, I hadn’t even been out at the ranch. I hadn’t been back to Jordan for a couple of weeks. Nobody had heard anything from him. So the FBI called and wanted to know if I would come down and see if we couldn’t figure out what had happened, if Edwin gave up or what. So I flew out there, but it started to rain. In that country, when it rains, you don’t go very far. There was this little piece of no-man’s land between, you could call it where the FBI was, but it was mostly press with all their satellite trucks. Then there was the compound and this little draw. The word was that you don’t want to go down there and get stuck because then who could get you out? With all the press there, there was just a whole lot of tension.

It wasn’t probably a good idea to go down there and get stuck in this round. So I got back and said, “In this country, generally you get on a horse when it gets muddy like this.” So these guys thought, “Oh, that’d be kind of cool.” So we went and got a horse from the neighbor Clinton Phipps (?). It was a pretty nice horse. I got on and I knew that it was going to be a little bit bigger of a deal. I rode over the hill. Of course there were all these satellite trucks. I’m thinking, “Oh yes, I guess this will probably be a little bit different than I thought.” So I rode on in and it was a little nerve-racking because I hadn’t heard from Edwin. I didn’t know where he was. If there was any time that I was a little nervous, that would have been the time. I rode on in and didn’t stay very long. Edwin wasn’t there. Russell was there. They were very boisterous and kind of strident at that point in the compound. I’m riding back—

BB: With no knowledge of what the heck was going on.

KO: They said Edwin was down in a cabin some place else. I just remember coming back and saying to the FBI agent, “I think we’re in trouble.” I remember clearly thinking that this wasn’t going in the direction that we wanted to go. So that was how that started. The story tells that I rode in every time on a horse. I rode one time and it was muddy. It was one of those moments that people like to remember just because it’s Montana I guess. From that point on, I came back home and thought, “We’re in trouble.” I’d stay in daily contact, but only from a distance because there really wasn’t lot there for me to do. In the meantime, the FBI negotiating team started conversations. Finally, Edwin did show up.

BB: They were talking to them on the telephone?

KO: Through another party they started to do a little negotiation. I went back one more time and made another introduction.

BB: There was another guy going in and out?

KO: It was actually one of the FBI negotiators that started a relationship with...I can’t remember who now. He was able to talk. I went back one more time to facilitate that negotiation again.
Then I wanted to come back home. It was springtime of the year. I had work to do. They kept kind of talking, which was good. They’d talk to me and I’d talk to them. We’d just visit about it. I was just kind of doing it more from here. They were very capable hands. They knew exactly what they were doing. Finally, Edwin showed up. I was able to talk to him on the phone. Edwin showed up. They were able to negotiate a thing that they thought—Edwin pretty much finally said, “This has got to end sometime. I don’t think my family should die.”

BB: His family was there with him?

KO: Some of the kids were with him. His wife wasn’t. He just felt that it was time. The pressure on him was just tremendous. You could see it every day. Not everybody in there wanted that. There were probably still about 19 or 20 of them. The first demand they made was to keep the press away. That was one of the first ten demands. By the end of this time, they loved it. They were out there hanging stuff out. They were living it up. They loved to watch themselves on CNN. So not everybody wanted it. I don’t know that he said this for sure, but I just assume Edwin said, “Well, I’m leaving. If you guys want to stay, you stay.” I assume that’s kind of the road where he went. He got a hold of the right people. It was arranged.

So I was sitting in Helena. I had just bought a mini storage business at the time. I got a call from my friends at the FBI. We talked daily. “You know, we’re going to fly one down. He’s going to talk to LeRoy. He’s in prison in Billings. We’re going to fly him down. If LeRoy will give his blessing on this, we think we’ve got the deal. Nobody really wins, but we think we can get this thing without somebody dying.” They were moving APCs in. They were shutting off power. Things were getting ready to—pressure was building. They were getting ready to do some things. That probably moved the negotiations along some, too. So they did and flew him down. LeRoy, under the conditions which I don’t recall—

BB: Did you ever meet him?

KO: Not personally. I talked to him on the phone several times.

BB: But you needed his blessing?

KO: Edwin and his people felt they needed his blessing before they could...we never used the word “surrender.” We always used the words “come out” before they could come out. They wanted his blessing. They flew him down there. I get this call from the FBI agent who said, “LeRoy says this will work. We have this one problem. That’s this so-called ‘evidence.’” The evidence to the Freemen was this room full of file cabinets and boxes, papers, and clients, all the things they have that proved that their system worked. It just proved that it worked. Of course that was the same evidence that the Justice Department wanted to show that they were (unintelligible) checks and doing all this stuff that certainly is illegal.
I saw checks that just had some numbers written on it. It didn’t matter. It was pretty wild the things that they had done with this stuff. They both wanted the same evidence. They called it their evidence. The Freemen were adamant about it because they were sure that if the FBI ever got a hold of that evidence, it would be switched. They’d just take the stuff out they wanted. They were very paranoid about it. The FBI guy said, “I think we have it, but we’ve all agreed that we’ll settle it if you’ll take the evidence.”

BB: That’s good. They had to keep all the evidence intact to satisfy both sides before these guys would come out. Do you remember what the agreement was that Schweitzer put his blessing on that made it possible for them to come out?

KO: I really don’t. It was probably pretty involved and intricate. I really don’t know all the specifics. All I remember is that this part of the stuff was an important part of it to keep the evidence in someone’s hands they both felt comfortable with. That was the lynch pin. So I said, “Yes I can run up in the pickup.” I was thinking I would have a couple of file cabinets full of stuff and that I’d put them in a storage unit, lock it, and I’d be fine. Before I leave, they call me and said, “No, I think we’re going to get you a truck.” So they flew me up. There was a 24-foot Ryder truck. They said, “This is what we think we’re going to have to use.”

So the next morning I drove it in. We backed it up and we started loading. We loaded file cabinets, guns, personal items, everything of value in that truck. It took pretty much all day. The truck was just jam-packed full of stuff. It must have been mid-afternoon by the time we got everything loaded. I never will forget this. Rodney Skurdal, this big red-haired guy with a big beard, dirty because he had been working in the dust all day—through this whole process he’d gotten angry at me a few times and put a couple of liens on me.

BB: How would he do that?

KO: They never have showed up. Maybe they were just pieces of paper.

BB: It would have to be through the establishment.

KO: That did happen sometimes. It didn’t happen to me, but it had happened to some elected officials. Anyway, the end of that morning he puts his arm on my shoulder and said, “You’ve worked so hard here today. I’m going to take one of them off you.”

My reaction was, “Oh, don’t worry about it Rodney. It’s no big deal,” or, “Gee thanks.”

We loaded it up. By the time all this stuff is in this truck, I kind of know I’m in trouble because there’s way more stuff here than I understood was going to be there. The good news is was this thing was ending and nobody was dying. There was going to be a happy ending. We’ll take this truck and just deal with what we have to deal with in the end. That’s where I went with it. I’ll do
the best I can to keep my word to everybody I’ve given it to. The main thing is that this thing is
going to end. So I drove the truck out and right behind me came each one of them—

BB: On foot?

KO: On foot. They walked out the gate and I was the lead truck. I had to stand back and look
and watched it on CNN. It was over. I wasn’t there but Edwin told the lead negotiator when he
got done, he shook his hand and said, “We got us a hell of a standoff, didn’t we?”

BB: So were they handcuffed and placed in custody?

KO: Yes, that’s correct. They were taken to Billings to the detention center. Then I probably
didn’t make a wise decision. I was tired and hot. I didn’t really feel like driving all the way to
Billings that night. So I made a decision to stay in Jordan that night with the truck. It was
probably not a wise decision in trying to build confidence from both sides. I think that
immediately the Freemen thought I was not holding my word because I didn’t drive down to
Billings.

BB: Oh, drive with them in a caravan?

KO: Yes. I didn’t feel like driving. A little side note too: how do you take a Ryder truck and seal
it? They gave me the bill of sale, the vehicle license number. They had to publish it in the paper
all the things I did with it. So the newspapers named the vehicle number. Then I took tape and
taped every latch and everything that would sign my name on it. I taped and locked it. I took
the keys. I did anything we could do just to make sure it was secure. I still have that document
somewhere that gives me the truck. I drove it out the next day to Billings.

I kind of knew this was going to happen. I just didn’t realize that when the truck was full, the
position I put myself in. As I said, “It’s well worth the tradeoff. We’ll deal with it. The main thing
is that it’s over. No tragedy has happened.” The rest of this stuff we can sort out. Certainly after
I got the truck out, the first thing I got served was when the Justice Department had a search
warrant. They had to do their job too. It was their evidence. So I had a weekend of, “What am I
going to do? Do I give this to the Justice Department and uphold my obligation as a legislator,
the constitution? Do I go to jail and not give it to them? What do I do to maintain confidence?”

BB: What commitment did you make to the Freemen?

KO: That I would protect it.

BB: Meaning what, that you’d bring it back here to Harrison and park it in your yard?

KO: That was never said. It was that I would protect it. I wouldn’t let the evidence be spoiled.
BB: So you felt that if you allowed the Justice Department to go through with the search warrant that you’d be violating that—

KO: I didn’t know that I believed that so much as what they believed. You kind of had to honor something. You just couldn’t take it all away from them. I just felt that if this was going to be an honorable deal it had to be an honorable deal on both sides. It was one of those strange moments when you go, “Now, how did I get myself in this fine mess?” My daughter was playing basketball in Columbia Falls. She was an all-star basketball player. They flew me up there. I drove all the way back. I didn’t sleep at all that night or that weekend. I was trying to think.

BB: Where was the truck?

KO: It was parked in Billings in a secure lot. I had padlocks and tape on everything. I felt secure about that. So Sherry Matteucci, who was the U.S. Attorney then—a wonderful lady—she worked hard to make things work. I went and saw her the next morning. She said, “I’ll tell you one thing Karl, we’ll figure a way out of this. We won’t send you to jail.” She was making light about it. So what she and the judge, who was Mormon by the way, came up with—there was an attorney down in the Bitterroot, John Smith, I believe. He had defended some of the Freemen types before. They had been familiar with him. What the judge decided to do was to appoint him as a court-ordered keeper-of-the-evidence, which was probably not totally satisfactory to the Freemen, but nonetheless it was a step in the right direction. It was somebody that they were familiar with; that they had confidence in. He had defended one of their guys one time.

The court basically said, “We don’t care what you think. This is what we’re going to do.” So it was kind of the way to let me off a bad spot I was in. I carried out the rest of my obligation of publishing it in the paper and everything. Then we took that truck to a great big storage unit and if I remember correctly, we had five or six copiers. We copied everything in that truck four times. Once for me, once for the Freemen, once for everybody; everything was copied. Everybody had the original copies. My representative was there to make sure that we could honestly say that we kept it together. I guess anybody can claim whatever they wanted to, but we tried to keep it as integral as we could. Everything was copied. I had to leave finally. It ran for a week trying to copy all that stuff.

BB: Where is that stuff? You’ve got a complete set of everything that was in it?

KO: Just about three years ago, Jim Secora (?) called me and they finally shredded it all.

BB: Who is Jim Secora?

KO: He works for the Justice Department.

BB: So the copies that were made for you also were kept by the Justice Department?
KO: I decided I didn’t need a room full of papers.

BB: Yes.

KO: So that happened four or five years ago. They kept them a long time.

BB: Was there any significance of that? There was a trial wasn’t there?

KO: There was a trial.

BB: Was any of that stuff actually used as important evidence?

KO: I suspect. I don’t know. A lot of it wasn’t even that important.

BB: Did John Smith defend them?

KO: No. they had court-appointed lawyers. So nonetheless, I guess long story short is, that ‘no-evidence thing’ was a very trying moment. It was resolved in a way that wasn’t perfect, but it was a way to try and keep everybody as satisfied as it possibly could. The next thing was the trial. If there were 18 or 20 people in there, there were 18 or 20 reasons why they were in there. There were some that were just crooks. They were just looking for a place to hide out. There were some like the Clark family that were pretty decent folks. I could relate to them. They had just made some really bad decisions and continued to make bad decisions. So the trial was interesting. Of course they were very uncooperative. They wouldn’t stand. They would yell and scream.

BB: They wouldn’t stand up when the judge walked in?

KO: They’d be very disruptive. It was a circus.

BB: We’re talking about Jacobi and Landers and those guys?

KO: That’s correct. They asked if I would testify on behalf of the prosecution. I said, “I’ll testify what I know. You need to know how I feel about Edwin. I think Edwin had more to do with this whole thing—”

BB: Having a peaceful ending?

KO: Edwin was ticked at me. He though I probably sold him down the river.

BB: Thought you had mishandled the evidence?
KO: Probably, yes. He told me one time, “We used you Karl.” I said, “Yes, I know.” He kind of understood. That was when he was in jail in Billings. I went in and saw him one time.

BB: So there you are on the witness stand—

KO: When I walk in, it was a very emotional moment for me. I walked in and Edwin wouldn’t stand or look at me. We’d kind of gone through some times together. I thought, “Well, I guess I understand Edwin.” Through the questioning and everything, I answered the best I could all the questions. One of the final questions was, “Did you ever feel threatened when you were in there?” Quite honestly I answered, “Not really. If I ever did, I always felt that Edwin would be there to take it for me.” That’s just how he was. He started to cry in the courtroom. When I got to leave, Edwin stood up. Later that day he testified in front of the jury. Edwin was acquitted. He was one of the only ones that were acquitted. I don’t know if there’s any justice in that or not. I think it just proved my point that he really was a pretty good guy taking a bad turn. Don’t get me wrong, he was the exception.

BB: He lives—

KO: I’m not sure.

BB: He no longer owns the ranch?

KO: No.

BB: Do you know who has the ranch?

KO: I’m not sure.

BB: What happened to the other guys? Did they all go to jail?

KO: I think everybody else went to jail. Some of them went for a long, long time. I’m sure they are still in jail.

BB: Does it concern you that they might get out? Would they have any grievances against you?

KO: I suppose there’s a possibility. There are several names that you don’t know. It’s been a number of years. I don’t think a lot about it. There was a time when I would think about it once in a while. I don’t think a lot about it. I think those days are gone. I think hopefully they’re rehabilitated and we all understand what took place. So I think some of the older Clark family members have died. They weren’t very healthy at the time. The rest of them, I’m not exactly sure where they all are right now. That’s kind of the story of how it started and how it ended with my involvement.
The story I think that needs to be told—and the one that I’ve tried to tell because people always want to know the story just for the adventure—I think there’s something here that we all need to understand, and that’s how people who are good people, who sometimes have unfortunate things happen, a lot of times financially, they make bad decisions and go the wrong way. As I explained before, it’s because they let their rage, anger, and hurt consume them. The danger that I see and the thing I think we all need to remember is that they only talk to people and associate with people who thought exactly like they did, who would believe the exact same thing they did. They would bolster each other with their stories. They would feed off each other.

As I’ve gone through life and watched, we all kind of do that from time to time. If there’s a danger or something, always keep your life in balance. Don’t be afraid to talk to somebody who doesn’t agree with you, who doesn’t necessarily see the world the same way you do. It will challenge your thoughts from time to time. Challenge your way of thinking. It’s something that these folks were always afraid to do. They just surrounded themselves in more believers and away they went. It was pretty much the cult mentality. You fill yourself full of it and just keep going. They let their rage burn.

So I used to give a little talk to kids about balance, about how to keep your life in balance and not get so focused in one area that your life became out of balance. That’s what these folks did. What could have been productive lives became total tragedies because their lives got totally out of balance. I think there’s a lesson for all of us, as you think about public policy and dealing with people you don’t necessarily agree with, just always be able to try and understand where the other person comes from so you can avoid that rage. Schoolteachers do it. Ranchers are notorious. We go down to the coffee shop and complain to each other all the time. It’s just kind of who we are. That’s the one lesson I think I learned from this whole experience.

BB: Sure. There’s a human tendency for birds of a feather to flock together. Of course we sympathize with each other. When it takes on the cloak of cult behavior, there’s a strategy on the part of some of these people we think of as cult leaders to deliberately isolate the faithful and keep them talking to each other and keep feeding that idea. That’s when things can really get out of hand. That’s exactly what happened in the case of the Justus Township and the Freemen. Are there still Freemen?

KO: The Freemen was something big in the ’70s and ended in the mid-’80s or ’90s.

BB: Montana militia men?

KO: I suppose there is still some of that out there. You certainly don’t hear of it like we did. From my experience, most of that is just a lot of people puffing themselves up. When it comes to action, often times they’re not there. I suppose there are always the spectrum and the segments. I’m sure there’s still one out there somewhere. We just don’t hear as much.
BB: It’s a psychology as much as an ideology. So I think that’s always there. It’s probably sometimes above the surface and sometimes beneath. There’s always the possibility that frightened, paranoid, desperate people will do some desperate thing.

KO: On either side of the political spectrum.

BB: Absolutely. Now Karl, you received a significant award from the FBI didn’t you?

KO: It was the Lou Peters Award. It was given by the Association of Retired FBI Agents. It was their highest award to give to civilians for public service. I got to fly out to Hawaii to receive an honorary from Louis Freeh, the director of the FBI. It was a very honorary moment. I was very honored. When you read about some of the other recipients, it was very humbling. Most of the recipients of this award have done something much more dramatic. It was a very nice award and I’m very proud of it.

BB: Anything else?

KO: People often ask, but it was the adventure of a lifetime.

BB: Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]