The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Alvin Miller: I was in a community agriculture project those two years in Illinois. At that point I was still in the Mennonite Church. It is a peace church, and believes that you don’t accomplish anything by killing other people. I just felt that I couldn’t do that. So I chose to be a Conscientious Objector. This opening was in connection with the Mennonite Church, in central Illinois near Kankakee, Illinois. It was a black community that had moved from the South, to Chicago. Many of them had been rural people to start with. They got to Chicago and they didn’t know how to deal with the big city. They moved south of Chicago about 120 miles to an area that was being developed and not one that was particularly to the liking of white people. It was a backwater place. A lot of them moved out there and were able to get cheap land. They were sitting on this area, but they didn’t know what to do with it. The church started a mission there, and thought it would be good to give them some guidance as far as what they could use the land for, and to get them started on different projects that make better use of the land such as gardening. Growing blueberries was one of the big projects I had. It was to get these people going, developing their land. A lot of them became like truck gardeners.

I worked pretty closely with the farm extension out of Kankakee, Illinois. We developed a plot to show – demonstration plot – so they [black landowners] could come in and see what they could do. I would go to their homes and help them.

Suzanne Vernon: Was the project monitored for success?

AM: That was one of the big problems. After two years they were just starting to get into it, and the project was let drop. They felt that most of the people that were interested in doing something had gotten started. Nothing was actually ever really evaluated, other than just by the way they were living. They had begun doing something [with the land] where they hadn’t done that before.

SV: Did you know before then that you enjoyed gardening?

AM: Oh yes, I grew up in the Swan Valley and my mother was always trying to grow a garden. In those years it was very limited. There’s quite a change in climate and what things people can grow. I got quite familiar with Steve Lamar, working at Caras Nursery [Gene worked at Caras] so that’s where I got to know Steve. He was growing things that no way we could grow when we lived in the Swan.

Alvin Eugene “Gene” Miller Interview, OH 422-210, 211, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
I left the Swan Valley in 1950 when I graduated [from elementary school]. We were lucky if we could grow cool crops such as lettuce, carrots, beets, and cabbage – things that could take some frost. But as far as strawberries, raspberries, and anything else that wouldn’t take a frost, they just sat. They didn’t bloom.

SV: So you’ve seen the direct effect of climate change?

AM: Oh, yes. People are coming in [to Caras] from the Swan -- I often ask people where they come from, to get an idea of what would be good to recommend for them so I can kind of know what to expect, and can kind of guide them in there. It has really been surprising. People are growing things that I never thought they would in some of those areas.

SV: I’m thinking about the rhubarb plants that grow so big up there now.

AM: We never did have much rhubarb. It grew up there, but it was always slow.

SV: Do you remember the hops?

AM: Yes, hops did really well.

SV: The old homestead buildings almost all have a few hops, did you ever hear why?

AM: It was a vine that grew very rapidly. I think it was something – well, there were lots of Norwegians, Finns and Swedes, and I think it was probably something that they brought with them. Just about every homestead had hops growing. I’m sure shade was part of it. My uncle Reuben [Kauffman] lived . . . well, when we first lived there we lived in a cabin that was just a two room type thing. On the front of the cabin they had taken little lodgepoles about an inch across and they’d made a kind of a porch screen, and they had hops growing on that. In the summertime that would completely block [shade] that area. It would make an area that was almost completely enclosed with the hops. In the winter, the hops were down and the sun would come in. It was on the south side of the house.

SV: A lot of the old homesteads have lilacs.

AM: Oh yes. But they freeze out. The plant would do well, but you’d only get blossoms maybe once every two or three years. We’d often get a late frost just as they were starting to bud out. On the Smith Place, where Steve [Lamar] lives on part of it, when we lived on the Smith place, they had planted about six big clumps of lilacs on either side of the path that went out the front door. These were huge lilac bushes. But you wouldn’t get blossoms a lot of the time because the blossoms would freeze. In fact that’s what happened to ours here, this year. Some years you just get fantastic blooms, and then other years there wouldn’t be anything.
SV: How would you compare this climate here in Potomac to the Swan.

AM: It’s warmer, but interestingly enough, like in this valley, the other end of the valley is almost five degrees warmer than this end, because it’s higher. When we first moved out here thirty years ago, we had some friends that lived at the other end of the valley on Red Rock Hill, and they could grow things that we couldn’t, like corn and squash. We can’t yet. The only way I can get something like that is to plant it near where it’s protected.

SV: So there are micro climates here.

AM: You see that in the Swan, too.

SV: What did you learn from working with that agricultural project?

AM: I learned a lot of things. They gave me extra schooling. One of the interesting things that I did was to spend two weeks in Washington D.C. with a group that was working primarily with tribes in Africa, in self-sustained farming and living. So they thought that would be of help to me in the community south of Chicago. Even though it was America, it was a similar type of thing that I was trying to do, helping people to be more self-sufficient, so they could sustain their own livelihoods without having to depend on other sources.

SV: Do you remember any specific things that helped them the most?

AM: Dealing with how to recycle, and to use organic type methods in developing their soils and land. So that was, as much as anything, the core of the project. Being self-sufficient and using what you have to make the land work for you, make food more affordable. A lot of these people were poor and didn’t have a good source of income. Anything to help them improve their way of life . . . it was the same thing in Africa . . . to help them improve their lives.

SV: Did you go to any reunions with the people you worked with in that program?

AM: In the first ten years I had quite a bit of contact with them. That was when we still lived in Indiana. After I finished my Alternative Service I got married and we lived in Indiana. I taught school and Myrtle worked as a nurse in northern Indiana.

At first, I taught school a couple of years [fifth grade] and then I wanted to go back into graduate school. I went to Purdue University in horticulture, took a summer and a semester there. I found out that there wasn’t much future in horticulture at that point. It was unbelievable. There were only three universities that had horticulture departments in the United States: Cornell, University of Oregon, and Purdue. And they said, if I received my master’s or doctorate at Purdue, I couldn’t stay there. They wanted new ideas to come into their department rather than just maintaining what they’ve got. So there were those choices

Alvin Eugene “Gene” Miller Interview, OH 422-210, 211, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
and neither of the others appealed to me. Well, today, almost every university has a horticulture department. Had I seen down the road that there would be more opportunities, I probably would have stayed with it. I didn’t. I quit that and decided to go into guidance counseling, and went to Ball State University in Indiana.

I had gotten my undergraduate degrees at Goshen College, which is a Mennonite College in Indiana. I got an associate’s degree at Heston College – do you know where all the Heston Machinery is made? I got an associate’s degree there. Then I went on to the other one and I went to Goshen for three years and got two bachelor’s degrees: a BA in biology with a minor in history and a bachelor of science in elementary education with a minor in secondary ed. So, as I said, I went to Purdue. Then I went back to teaching, and was doing my graduate work in guidance counseling. Then I found out, after I got partly through that too, they were telling me that we need counselors in every school. It’s very important. And then, by the time I got into the second and third years of that degree, they said that they didn’t have money for counselors. Schools can’t afford them. Even though they needed them they couldn’t afford them. So, I said, well, I really pulled another one . . . and, so I decided just to go ahead and get my master’s degree in education. I could use information that I had gotten from the other two explorations (laughs) and I could apply them to my education degree. So that’s what I ended up doing, was getting a master’s in education at IU, Indiana University.

All these others courses, as it ended up – I had minors in math, chemistry, English and Psychology. I had to take those classes to qualify for the other programs. That all became very useful to me later, when I was teaching.

SV: How much influence did your grade school education have on your desire to go on to college?

AM: Mabel Carney was very effective, and she made education fun and interesting. I always liked school. For me, it was a real break from living in the Swan Valley. Most of my family had never gone beyond high school. In fact, my parents both had only had two years of high school. For me to then decide that I wanted to go on and get higher education . . . part of it was that I could see that my father had been a logger and had worked for all of the different . . . Wineglass and Gray’s mill, and he finally ended up with Pyramid and then he moved around and worked different logging jobs. But that was his life, and I said that wasn’t for me. I saw that in the Swan Valley. The people there, their horizon was very, very small and narrow. I wanted more than that.

SV: What did your dad do in the logging?

AM: Everything. He was sawyer. He was cat skinner, he worked in almost every position there was in the sawmill at the time. That was his life. That’s all he knew. Oftentimes, when we were living there, we always raised cattle, too. So my mother and I ended up taking care of the cattle.

Alvin Eugene “Gene” Miller Interview, OH 422-210, 211, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
He would come out to the ACM camps and live there during the week, at Salmon Lake and Woodworth, different places, depending on where the work was.

SV: Did he ever tell any stories about those camps?

AM: Oh yes. It was a rough life, it was hard. They would work really hard all day long. Most of the time everybody was so tired, that they would just come in a flop in the cabins. The next morning it was get up early and eat big breakfasts and head to the woods again. That was their life.

SV: Did you guys have a car?

AM: My dad usually had the vehicle, so Mother and I were usually on hoof. He would drive to the camps. Then we were without vehicles, Mother and I, so if we wanted to go anywhere we walked. And we did. You know where Reuben lived? [Kauffman Road] And behind there, where Virginia Stark? She was a Meskie and we rented from her father for many years. Her father bought the place from Chris Sorenson. My dad wasn’t aware of how the thing was going to go. But we were good friends with Chris. Chris Sorenson several times alluded to my parents that he wanted to leave the place to me. When he died he died very suddenly. The people that he had trusted in Missoula had lost or misplaced . . . they wouldn’t acknowledge a will or any of the money that he said he had. He had said he had plenty of money to take care of him, to help. They would do his banking for him because he didn’t have a vehicle. He didn’t drive. When he went anywhere he’d catch a ride, like with my parents or with Ed Beck or other people in the valley there. They would bring him to town. Strooms were another one. Tauno Strom would also bring him. But he got the flu or something and then came to town. He was really sick. He called for my dad and my dad and Ed Beck tried to come to town. It was in the middle of the winter and the vehicle they had didn’t have any heat in it. So by the time they got to Seeley Lake they were so cold they had to stop and get coffee. And by the time they got to Missoula he had died, about a half hour before they got there. So they don’t know what he wanted to say. But they figured he wanted to tell them where his things were, so that they could take care of it. Well, then it went up for tax money. That’s when Meskie bought the place for taxes. Then my father had bought the Hoogenbruiin place. I don’t know what’s back there in that corner now, there has been many things in that corner, in that 160. Everything from movie stars – well Geoffe Foote was the one who bought it from my father and then he made the Falls Creek Foundation. Then he sold it . . . and it’s been sold many times since. Anyway, we owned that and the Meskie place for a long time. We lived in all four of those sections, I mean quarters, at one time or another. We lived where Reuben lived first, because my grandfather had bought that. That was what we called the Hull place. My grandfather bought it with the idea that he’d like to go in there and my grandmother said, “No!” She put her foot down. So then it was decided that . . .

SV: Why did he want to come in here?
AM: He always kind of had in mind that he would like to homestead. It was kind of the end of the homesteading. It was 1911 when he moved to the Flathead Area. Anyway, this place came up and he found out about it, and he bought the place. Then he thought he could use the place to run some of his cattle. The property he had in the Creston area, well there was some farmland, but he needed more pasture land. So what he did, he bought this place with the idea that he could pasture the cattle there during the summer and bring them back to the Flathead during the winter. He told my parents that if they wanted to go up and kinda take care of the Hull place, why, he would give them a couple head of cattle and they could start their herd and they would take care of his cattle there, but the hay, feed them, and so forth.

SV: So that’s why your folks moved down?

AM: Yes. But anyway, I forget what year, but in the 1940s, Reuben and Sadie decided that they would be interested in buying that Hull place from grandpa. We had already moved back to the Meskie place, the Chris Sorenson place.

SV: That was before you bought the Hoogenbruin place?

AM: It was about the same time. But the house on the Hoogenbruin place was not livable. The homestead was shake roof, shake floor. And the doors were just handmade, the old boards with . . . the windows were very small. So my dad decided that since the Meskie place had that little cabin. Do you know where it is? That’s where we lived! I go back and see it now, and think that it looked twice as big when I was little.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
SV: Tell me more about Chris Sorenson.

AM: He was a very small Danish man. He came over in the late 1800s and his wife died on the boat coming on the way over. But he continued on. He came and homesteaded that area, that place up in the Swan. He worked for the Forest Service off and on. He was just a very small person. I can just maybe remember him. I was about four when he died. He was very caring. A loner. But he was close enough that he could easily walk to the Ranger Station over on Condon Creek. It was just downstream a little ways, only about a mile and a half, by the old road that was back there, the original road that went through. So he had walked to work. Like I said, he never drove. Never had a vehicle. He must have had horses before we came in there, because he had done a lot of work. He had cleared off a big area for the hay meadow. That big hay meadow back there? He did all that by hand with horses. He was a hard worker. He lived there alone for many, many years.

SV: Where was he buried?

AM: He’s buried in what they called the poor farm here in the Rattlesnake (Missoula). He became a ward of the State when he died because they couldn’t find any records of his or any money. Somebody he had trusted . . . we kinda knew who it was but I don’t want to say. They just kept quiet. They didn’t say anything. They just didn’t acknowledge it. He had told my parents many, many times, “You don’t have to worry about me. I have plenty of money to take care of any funeral expenses.” But when it came time, there was nothing to be located. He told us he had a will, and it was in safekeeping. So when he called for my father, they were sure that he wanted to tell him where the things were. But he died a half hour before they got there.

SV: You’ll always wonder. . .

AM: My parents always felt that he had willed the place to me even though I was only a child. He had no family. Nobody else came to America from Denmark with him. No family ever came over.

SV: He built several buildings on that place.

AM: They are all gone now. There was a nice big log barn. There was another shed, we used it as a woodshed. My Dad made one end of it into a shop. It was quite a large shed. I think Chris used it for a woodshed, too. Then he had what we called the chicken house, which was a fairly sized log building. And the outhouse was made of little logs. And there were several . . .

SV: I wonder if he built them all himself?
AM: I think, well, I don’t really know for sure. But I have a feeling that he got somebody connected with the Forest Service. I wasn’t old enough to remember what he said about the construction of the buildings and so forth. But I know, like Mary Harris, my parents kind of looked after her. She lived over there behind where the Forest Service was up at Condon. And my father would go over there and rechink her logs about every other year. My mother would always go over and help clean the whole place. They came into the Swan by wagon, and brought all of their furniture by wagon. He built, gosh, he was a master craftsman. He built that log house. He had two barns and another shed, what you would call a tack shed, and another shed all made out of lodgepole logs. Beautifully done. They were well crafted. Stayed for many, many years, until well, it was after we moved out of the valley one of them burned, I think it was the tack shed that burned first. It’s surprising that it didn’t catch the other buildings on fire. Later, all the outbuildings were destroyed. The house was the only thing that was left, that I remember for a while. When Mary got too old to take care of it, she didn’t feel comfortable, she couldn’t walk. She used to always walk out to the main road, every day to get her mail. Well, the mail only came two days a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, but she would walk. Of course, Becks were kind of the other people who looked after her. When the people at the Forest Service were there, they kept rotating, and Scovels stayed there for quite a while. He was the ranger for several years. At the ranger station. They lived in the main building, at the ranger’s house. They would kind of keep an eye on her, too.

SV: That’s the only person who has a picture of her, that I know of, is Lanny Scovel. It’s a picture of her sitting on the steps. She was much older. She had white hair, pulled back. Did you know her before that?

AM: I can remember before she got really white.

SV: But her husband died so young.

AM: Yeah, he died just about the time he got all the buildings done. You know, everything was looking really good. He died of a heart attack.

SV: Do you remember where they came from?

AM: She talked about coming from the Ohio or Nebraska area somewhere. The Midwest. I know they came to Whitefish or Kalispell, Whitefish I guess it was, by train. And then they bought a horse and wagon, and brought their stuff into the Swan by horse and wagon.

SV: From Swan Lake?

AM: yes.

SV: Some of those people must have had so much courage or curiosity. What drove them?
AM: Well, the thing about Mary Harris was she just practically lived off the land. She didn’t buy anything, practically. I know when my parents went to town they would ask her... well they did that with Chris. Anytime we went out to get things, supplies, we’d always ask them and others if they needed anything and we’d bring the things that they needed. Usually it was just the basics like flour and sugar and coffee, and rice oftentimes and beans. Mary Harris always had a big garden. She would can everything. She pretty much lived off of that garden. Of course, in the Swan at that time, wild game was... the Fish and Game would say, if you need meat just go and get it. Just don’t tell us.

SV: And how many years earlier the Indians had gotten murdered for illegal hunting?

AM: Right. It was kind of... it was an unwritten thing, an understanding. If anybody needed meat, just do it.

SV: That was in the thirties and forties?

AM: Yeah. In about 1950 things started changing. The mills started moving in, and it was after the war. During the war years, I tell you, that valley was almost empty. During the wintertime, it must have been about 1941 or 1942 somewhere, I think there were only five to six families that stayed in the valley over winter. I know the Hollopeters all moved to Swan Lake and they came back. All except Royden. He was a thin man. In a way, you knew Reuben, he was built very similar. Kind of long and lean. Never any fat on him. He was another one that, for many years, hardly ever left the valley. And he just kind of subsisted. They’d buy the basics and lived off the land otherwise. I don’t think he ever had a garden that I remember. I don’t know how he got other food. Most people lived off the wild game. He did get a vehicle. He did drive to town, some, but not very often. And then of course when Stroms brought the store in there, that kind of changed things.

I can remember when Tauno and, well they had a small place, a very small place, and they lived in the back and in the front part... well, at first it was just like bread and coffee, and of course the bread was a week old before they got it sold.

SV: Bread confuses me. I guess the bachelors would buy bread.

AM: Yes, and crackers and coffee and sugar and flour. Oatmeal, cereal. And some of the canned stuff. They always had several of the canned fruits and vegetables, for the bachelors. There were quite a few of them around.

SV: What about gasoline?

AM: Interestingly enough, Tauno would go to town once a week and he had a Ford flatbed truck and he would put about five or six 55-gallon barrels onto it and go into the bulk plant in Missoula and get those filled. Then he would bring them out. He had a tank underground there,
and . . . it was a big thing for me to go out and, it was great, to pump the gas. So my parents were very good friends with the Stroms and they would got down at least once or twice a week. When my dad knew that Tauno was going to unload the gas, he would go down and help him unload the gas. And put the 55-gallon barrels into the one that was underneath the pump. I think it was only about four or five 55-gallon barrels. So he’d get about a week out of that. That would pretty much much take care of the valley.

SV: Well there probably weren’t that many gas vehicles. Sawmills maybe.

AM: No, there weren’t. I think Uno Strom was one of the first to bring a sawmill in, and then Ray Fenby. They were some of the first sawmills that I can remember in the valley. There were more later, like the Wineglass.

SV: Well, there weren’t the timber sales. Tell me about Lydia Strom, Tauno’s mom.

AM: Lydia Strom. She was a very typical Finnish woman.

SV: Did you hear how her husband died?

AM: That was actually before we moved into the valley. They lived up at Rumble Creek at that point. In fact, I think it was just, like a couple years before we moved into the valley that we heard that he died. She bought the place, well, the road was relocated where it is now. It used to kind of go up by Cooney Creek and so forth. Then they moved it down closer to the river. She bought that place which is now the Swan Centre. It was called mercantile for a while. So she bought that and just had that small cabin there. That’s where she lived. Tauno lived with her. Uno had already moved to Salmon Prairie as I remember.

Lydia’s daughter married a Ratabaugh (spelling?) and they lived in Swan Lake, and eventually moved to Kalispell.

Then, of course the Fenby’s and the Hollopeters were all related, because Gertie Fenby was a Hollopete. There was Royden, the oldest, then John, and then I think Gertie, and Roxie. There was another one or two that I didn’t know. Two died pretty young, if I remember rightly.

SV: Back to Chris Sorenson, do you remember if any of these guys trapped?

AM: They did, some. That was another sideline that most of the early timers did. I can remember them stretching the skins and always talking about it. And then, once a year – a couple time I know my father went around and collected them and took them to town for them. They’d kind of bale them up, and tie them together.

SV: It seems like the methods to make extra money were more available to the men than to the women, like Mary Harris. Did she trap?

Alvin Eugene “Gene” Miller Interview, OH 422-210, 211, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
AM: No, she didn’t. She never did.

SV: Did she have milk cows?

AM: She didn’t have any when we were there. I think earlier on, when they built the barn, before her husband died, they had cattle. And of course horses, definitely. They had a beautiful team of horses. When we first moved in there, she would take these horses and go out and saw down trees with a crosscut saw and drag them in with the horses. She would cut her own wood until she got older, then my father and Ed Beck would often go over and cut her wood for her. When she was younger, she did all of that.

SV: She must have enjoyed being outdoors.

AM: She had the most beautiful garden. They had put a big fence around the house. It must have been about a quarter of an acre that they had fenced in. It was a big high fence so the deer couldn’t get in. She had beautiful flowers. She had that place just covered with flowers. Well, interestingly enough, she had hollyhocks, lots of daisies – I can remember the white daisies – and golden glow (globe?) – my mother got some from her – which is a flower that grows about this tall (shows with his hand, about 30 inches). In fact I’ve got on down by my chicken house. I don’t know where I got it. My mother had it, maybe, and it might have come from Mary Harris.

SV: Women must have been skilled at transplanting.

AM: Yes. You talked about rhubarb. That was one thing that Mary Harris could grow really well. The garden was down below the house to the north. Their well, fortunately, was not far from the garden. She would irrigate that garden, carried water from the pump to the garden. A hand dug well. And of course she did all of her own washing and laundry by hand. With a washboard. And I can remember that she would bake every week. She would bake bread. Anytime you would go over there you could smell fresh bread. I’ll bet anything it was sourdough. It tasted so good. She loved to bake. She had a big wood cookstove. She’d go out and cut the wood and split it and bring it in. She did all her cooking, and heating the water . . .

SV: What did people grow in their gardens?

AM: Cool crops. She would grow turnips, too. My parents weren’t into turnips. But, you know, beets, carrots, lettuce, cabbage. She had some greens, too, that weren’t spinach. I don’t know what they were. She had a good-sized garden, and always beautiful. Immaculate. There wasn’t a weed in the garden. Every plant looked thriving and healthy.

SV: Potatoes?
AM: No, you couldn’t grow potatoes. They would freeze. (The blossoms.)

SV: But you could get them in the Mission Valley?

AM: Yes, and the Flathead. That’s where most of them came from. When I was growing up, my grandparents could grow all that stuff out in the Flathead area. So every summer and fall . . . I think they would often bring things like that for Mary. They’d go out and get the fresh stuff and bring stuff in to her. Vegetables and fruits. Especially like beans, and corn, and apples. Peaches and pears, they were brought in from Washington. That was one of the big trips in August was to go and get that. Canning day was a big thing.

My mother did that. I had to help her. Peel, core and clean, wash. Beans, it was snapping them. Oh, peas is another thing that almost everybody grew.

SV: I’d really like to hear more about going to school, too. Tell me more about Florence Holmes.

AM: Florence Holmes lived on Holland Creek. I was in first grade when she was my teacher. I was five years old when I started, so Florence must have taught in 1941-1942 school year. She was pregnant with Mike the first year I was there, while she was teaching. She finished out the year. Mike (Tom) was born in the late spring or summer, right after school was out. That would have been about 1941 or 1942.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

From Digital Recording:

Florence used to pick us up in her car. Let’s see, there was Richard and LeRoy Lake (spelling?) She’d pick them up (near Guest Ranch Road today), and then pick up Hollopeters and me at the other end, and then go back to the school.
(Florence Holmes discussion. She would pick up the students on the way to the school in the mornings, and then take them to drop off spots in the afternoon.)

AM: She had a sedan, and I think it was a Dodge. It was a green car, and we thought it was a fancy car. (She used to pick up the kids and take them to Smith Flats School.) By that time my folks had gotten a Plymouth pickup. Can you imagine? That was the first pickup my dad had. We had the Model A first. He changed that into a buzz saw to cut wood, and then he bought the Plymouth pickup and it was not a very good one. It was always breaking down. He was always having to fix it. And then he went and got an International Harvester. They weren’t four wheel drive.

Florence would pick us up and bring us home, to the drop off spots. I still had to walk clear from the road in, which was about a mile. We moved from the Hull place to the Smith place my first year. And my folks were trying – at that point – they moved to the Smith place because they had a bigger barn. They got some milk cows. And they were going to try to supplement the income by milking and selling the cream, and taking it out to the road and the mail man would pick it up and take it to Seeley Lake and on to Missoula.

One year of that and they decided that was not a profitable thing. My dad was trapping during that time, too. He wasn’t logging, that one year, and he stayed home and milked cows. We had chickens and hogs, milk cows. And he trapped beaver and muskrats. Just about everything. Mink, bobcats, lynx. I don’t think he ever caught any wolverines that I remember.

I can remember particularly beaver and muskrat, was the big thing. He had other traps away from the water. And coyotes! But the bobcats, coyotes and mink . . . the pelts were brought to Missoula to the Pacific Hide and Fur.

SV: Was that in the 1940s?

AM: Early 1940s.

SV: Did he ever use 1080 (poison for coyotes)?

AM: No, he never did. He wasn’t into that.

SV: Did you have problems with livestock predation?

AM: Bears, more than one time. We shot several bears trying to get into the pigs and the chickens. The cows were never a problem but the pigs and chickens were, and the rabbits. We always had rabbits. That was another source of meat. The chickens and the rabbits were something we could supplement throughout the year. We could go out and kill a rabbit or
chicken and eat something different [different from venison]. The animals were enclosed. The 
chickens during the day would often be running around. But the rabbits, never.

You had to make sure to enclose your animals at night, if they were running loose. The bears 
were black and grizzly, both. I have those stories in my memoirs. (See attached copy of 
memoirs.) We had the story of the grizzly bears in there, including the one about Mother going 
over [to Chris Sorenson's] in the middle of the night to get a gun.

SV: Tell me more about your mother.

AM: She was a very caring person. She was everybody’s mother. She was always helping 
somebody. If anybody needed help, all they had to do was say something and Mother would be 
there. I can remember when Beesons -- I don’t remember which one of them was sick – but 
she’d walk out and help them every day sometimes, or several times a week. She did that with 
Hollopeters, I remember, when Clara got sick one time. She went out and took care of things at 
the Hollopeters. And she always was taking care of kids. The Harmon’s -- she took care of them 
many, many times. She would take them to our house and keep them there for a while. But she 
would often go out to the Harmon’s and help Gene (Jean?) take care of things.

There was another old gentleman who lived down behind the Harmon’s, Fred Herrick.

SV: Tell me about him.

AM: He was another one of those little Danish guys. He and Chris were a lot alike. Lived alone. 
Built his own homestead down there. He’d walk out once in a while. You wouldn’t see him too 
often, but once in a while he’d come out. But you know, neither of them, well, most of those 
guys like that, as far as mail was concerned, they hardly ever had mail. Never had a mailbox 
that I know of. They just didn’t have any reason to get mail, I guess. And of course, they would 
always . . . they would send in their money for taxes, they’d get stamps or something and bring 
it and give it to somebody else to take the mail for them. They never had a box number or 
anything like that.

SV: I wouldn’t have thought about that. Everybody gets mail!

AM: Well, they didn’t.

SV: Did Fred Herrick trap?

AM: yes, he did. That was one of his big things. Of course, he was fairly close to the river, too. 
So, yes that was one of the things he did. You were asking earlier about taking the hides out. 
That was one of the things I remember. Some would concentrate one kind of animal rather 
than another. I think he was really into mink, if I remember right. There were a couple of times 
there were mink farms in the valley. They didn’t operate very long. The problem was to feed
the mink (laughter) the mink farmer would take wild animals (deer) to feed the mink, until they

SV: What was your favorite thing about school?

AM: Everybody was like a big family. Everybody would just kind of look out for each other. I
don’t remember much fighting at all, whether we were just not of the nature to fight or what.
But I don’t remember any fighting going on. There’d be little disagreements, petty
disagreements, but nothing ever major. We just had a great time together, because we were so
isolated. The only time we’d see each other was at school. So it was a big thing, it was our social
time. It was time, for me, there was not much rivalry (competition). School was easy for me
compared to a lot of the kids, so I would often help them, especially Jamie (Hollopeter) and
Richard (Lake) because we were the three . . . and interestingly enough, there were the three of
us that really weren’t quite old enough. But there were only Lucille Haasch and LeRoi Lake, and
I think Dan Hollopeter I think was the oldest one, in 8th grade that one year . . . so with only
three kids they didn’t feel that was hardly enough for the teacher. So since I was born in
November and Richard was born in December, and Jamie was born in March, or something like
that, we were all five years old. And they thought, well, we could start school.

It was kind of like Kindergarten. So we did. Well, Jamie and Richard repeated the first grade,
because they weren’t mature enough to handle it. So then I went on alone. Jamie moved to
Swan Lake for a couple of years there, and when he came back he was a year behind me.
Richard repeated, so I was alone (in my grade) until Henry Pennypacker came. I think that was
in the fourth of fifth grade. So when Henry came, he was a challenge. He and I would compete
against each other, to see who could get done first and get the best grade. But then, he was
there just fifth and sixth grade – you probably got that record somewhere. That was when the
Wineglass Mill moved in. We went from about seven kids to 27 in one year.

When they (mill workers and families) were starting to move in, by the end of that one year,
Mabel Carney had 27 that we ended up with that one year. That’s when they decided they HAD
to have another school. She was . . . One teacher with all grades and 27 students, I don’t know
how she did it.

When I was in second or third grade, that’s when Ricketts moved in. Dorothy was two grades
ahead of me, or maybe one grade, I forget. I must have been in second and she was in third.
Then her parents – that would have been about 1944? Right after the war. Anyway, Dodge
Power Wagons were “excess” because the war was over and they (military) didn’t need them
anymore, so they bought a Power Wagon and drove bus. Ricketts bought the Power Wagon and
contracted with the school. We thought Oh My Goodness this is such great stuff. It took two
steps to get into it!

Alvin Eugene “Gene” Miller Interview, OH 422-210, 211, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield
Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
That was the school bus, and they’d come around and pick us up. They both drove it – Tom and Viola Ricketts. If Tom was working away, then Vi drove it. That was for two or three years. I don’t know for sure how many years they had that.

SV: Tell me what a typical day was like.

AM: The first year Mrs. Carney taught at Smith Flats, her husband brought her down from Lindbergh Lake every morning, and picked her up in the evening. He was getting up in age. You probably know the story of that. They had moved into the valley shortly after they got married. She had known one of his daughters here, a college classmate. She came home with her friend and met this friend’s father, who was Dick Carney. Then they married. So he was maybe thirty years older than she was. But by that time, she was in her thirties and he was probably in his sixties. She didn’t drive, at least not at that point. She did later, because when he got sick she had to. She didn’t like to drive, especially on the winter roads. So then, several of the men in the valley decided they had to build a teacherage (next to Smith Flats). They would then live in the teacherage during the school year and moved back to Lindbergh Lake... But up until that time, like when Florence was our teacher, and the first year when Mrs. Carney was our teacher, when we would get there we all had our little chores to do. We had to get in wood, build the fire, and in the wintertime, thaw the pump out. We had to keep water somewhere around, and it would freeze at night. First of all we’d start the fire, get it going and get warm. Then put the water on. When it got hot enough we’d go out and thaw the pump out, get water, and bring it in. We had one of those big ceramic crocks (Sharon MacQuarrie has this) and we’d put the water in that, and we all drank from the same dipper or cup. That went on until Sharon’s father (Dick Hickey) came one day and saw that everybody was drinking out of the same cup. He just went through the ceiling and said, “This has got to stop!” So we got a paper cup dispenser. It was a big deal! And of course we’d all stand around the stove until it finally got warmed up in the morning.

Once everything was thawed out and warmed up a little bit, we’d all go to our seats and the teacher would start our lesson, one class at a time. She would get the older ones who could be working more independently and she would give them an assignment and write it on the board, and they could do that. The littlest ones at time were, of course, very restless and couldn’t focus very long at a time. She would get us going (the younger ones) and teaching. One thing that Mrs. Carney was very, very adamant on was phonics. We had to know the alphabet phonetically almost before we could say ABC. So it was “ah – ba – cuh – duh – fuh – guh – uh . . . .” Oh, yes.

SV: So you learned the alphabet, to say it, phonetically, along with the regular . .

AM: Exactly. And if any child came into the school who didn’t know the phonetic sounds, that was the first thing they had to learn when she was teaching. It was a great thing and I really appreciate that because we could sound our words out after that, and figure them out. So
when we’d come to a new word she’d make us sound it out phonetically. Any new words. Phonics was a big thing for her.

Of course, with the little ones there, it was difficult to keep us busy. So what she would often do was get us (little ones) started doing things, and then she would start with the others. One of the older ones like Lucille or LeRoi (spelling?) — she would have them read to us or do something. Lucille loved that kind of thing. She was used a lot (Lucille). She was kind of a teacher’s aide.

LeRoi wasn’t too keen on it, but he’d do it.

SV: How were the teachers regarding manners?

AM: Very strict. Mrs. Carney was very strict. You didn’t show any disrespect or anything to anyone. Florence was much more “go with the flow.” My last two years was with Martha Anderson. I had Martha for the last two years (1948-49 and 1949-50) and I had Mabel Carney for five years. Florence Holmes for one — 1941-42; and from 1942-1948 was Mrs. Carney.

SV: Did she go to the Wineglass School then?

AM: Yes she did, because it was closer to home for her. And another thing was that, it seems to me, that her husband Dick was having some healthy problems and wanted to stay at home more. And I think she also started driving. It was closer for her, so she didn’t have far to drive. I don’t remember, because I was out of the valley, then, but I thought she taught like two years at the Wineglass and then they moved out. They moved to Greenough so she could be closer to the medical facilities, because he was having heart problems.

SV: I have just heard so many good things about her as a teacher.

AM: One of the things that I particularly remember about her, was the Christmas program. Every Christmas she would make these puppets. She would make these puppets, and make the stage, and we would always put on a puppet show for our parents for Christmas. People story. I can remember one time it was Jack and the Beanstalk. Stories like that. Little Red Riding Hood one year. She would make animal (puppets) too, because I can remember the Big Bad Wolf.

SV: speaking of wolves, did you see a lot of wildlife?

AM: Yes, and the wolf story is in my memoirs. And the bear stories.

SV: Did people talk much about wildlife?
AM: Not much, it wasn’t a big thing. When we lived there (at Chris Sorenson’s? Virginia Stark
owned it later, the Meskie place) in the springtime we’d always see four or five bears almost
every day. Grizzly bears. And you could always tell when the grizzly bears came out, because
then the other bears would disappear. The grizzly bear was dominant. But there was more than
one time that I can remember going to school and seeing like a grizzly bear, or black bears, or
coyotes and wolves. They were there. We just respected them. That was commonplace. We
respected them and they respected us.

Today, there is so much more people contact, they are habituated, they are used to people. In
those days, people were like any other wild animal, they respected each other and there wasn’t
any reason to both one another, generally speaking. In the springtime, especially, was when
they were most aggressive. We were always careful of keeping – homesteaders or anybody like
that – knew that you don’t leave things out where animals would be attracted to them, like wild
game. Usually people would process animals right away. My mother would can it (venison) –
deer or farm animals – you didn’t just hang it. You processed it, you took care of it. And another
thing, if people got game, they would often share it with other families. It would be used up
quickly so it wouldn’t spoil. (Neighbors) would often put their heads together and say, “Hey, we
need to get some meat sometime. Do you want to help out, and we’ll share it?” That was an
understanding in the valley.

As far as animals being a problem, no. If you had a garden you had to keep it away from the
deer and elk. They would come in and feed with the animals all winter long. That was a
common thing, to feed the deer and elk with the horses and cows. (laughs) They would come in
and eat with the cattle.

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
(discussion about salt blocks attracting deer)

AM: You never put a salt block where it would be a problem. You didn’t put salt out to attract animals, to bring them in. It was just a natural thing to do, they would share it with the cows and horses. But you would put it where it was accessible to your animals. Usually the deer and elk wouldn’t come in when the horses or cows were at a salt block, but they would come in otherwise, when the domestic animals were gone. They’d fight over it! I can remember more than one time when elk would come in, and one would challenge the other trying to get to the salt block. Deer would do that, too, the same thing. Push each other.

SV: There’s a lot of controversy, still, about elk in the Swan. Most people will say that there weren’t any elk in the valley until later . . .

AM: Elk wasn’t a big thing in the Swan, even when I was growing up. There were small herds. Actually I don’t think the elk really did much until they started the logging, because the forest was too dense, and there wasn’t enough of the ground cover for their food. The other thing is, there aren’t really any good wintering grounds in Swan Valley for elk. They need open hillsides, and there just aren’t open hillsides, except for now – from the logging and clearcuts. Early on, and even now, they come clear down to the game range, because there are no open hillsides.

SV: What about fox?

AM: There weren’t any foxes. In fact, there weren’t any foxes in this area until later. Since we moved back in the 1970s – you know, growing up, I never knew what a raccoon was, and now they are all over the place. Foxes were another thing. We have them over here, and if our chickens are out, they get plucked out. We used to have bantams, and they used to fly out of the pen, and they were gone!

But the elk, there weren’t big herds, ever. Even now, I don’t think there are big herds. There’s just no open hillsides where the wind will blow the snow off the grass.

SV: I have a couple other questions. The Smith Flats School area is an historic Indian campsite. Were there any signs of Native American use that you remember?

AM: Not in that area, but in the Cooney Creek area there were sites. And there were sites up on Elk Creek, in the meadows you could call them, but they were more like sloughs. Water in the springtime and they’d dry up in the summer. As I can remember, the landing field as we called it – do you know where the old landing field is? Where the Hollopeter Road goes (east) and the (Charles Road) subdivision is (west) – there used to be a big field west of the highway. That’s the old landing field. That was another place where the Indians camped, and that of course wasn’t far from Smith Flats School.
SV: What types of things did you see?

AM: The rock circles. And there weren’t a lot of those, either, because they had been destroyed over the years. The homesteaders came in and cleared it for hay and pasture. I do remember seeing the small brush huts. Those were more down around the Gordon Ranch, in that area, and near Barber Creek, the brush type things. Cooney, Barber and the Gordon Ranch area.

The Indians were still coming in when we first moved there. I can remember that people were still talking about the massacre. There was definitely a lot of prejudice – the feeling that the Indians had no business being in there and so forth. That was kind of a feeling among the homesteaders that the Indians had the reservation and “Why don’t they stay there?”

SV: I’ve heard another side of that, from Al Wise . . .

AM: Yes, that was the treaty. But the valley folk didn’t feel that way. I don’t think that (homesteaders) felt hostile toward them. But they did feel that they (Indians) didn’t have any business coming over (to the Swan) because they had the reservation. But they were not knowledgeable to the fact that the treaty did give them that opportunity and privilege.

There were a couple routes that the Indians would use to come into the Swan Valley. The one down by Cold Creeks, the Mollman; and the Jocko was another one. A few did come over the Missions, where the wilderness area is. But that was too rugged for most, so they usually used the Jocko or the Mollman/Cold Creek trail.

So, Salmon Prairie was another place where people would come in and hunt. But most of the time, there wasn’t a lot of conflict. The Indians would come and go before most people in the valley knew they were there. People weren’t very mobile. The homesteaders walked nearly everywhere.

SV: A change of subject – when were the roads plowed in the winters?

AM: That didn’t happen until after the war, the late 1940s, and Lake County was even later. I would say in 1945 or 1946 was the beginning of winter snowplowing, after a big snow storm but not on a regular basis. So you just didn’t go much in the wintertime, anywhere. You couldn’t afford the gas, that was a problem, until Tauno started bringing it in. The next place for gas was Seeley Lake, and that was a long drive, too.

SV: What was the general culture like in Swan Valley? Was there much drinking? The bar didn’t come until . . .

AM: They came during the middle forties (Louis Krause who built Liquid Louies). No, there wasn’t much drinking. People would make homebrew, but very few people I know of went and
bought liquor. You know, for special occasions, when somebody would go out they’d get a
bottle and bring it back in with them, and make it last a long time. Drunkenness was not . . .
well, there was no such thing until after Louis Krause moved in and opened the bar. Until that
time, there was very little drinking, but then it got to be a problem.

SV: The culture changed.

AM: It changed tremendously. They straightened the road out considerably, and widened it. It
was still a long drive to go anywhere. It was all gravel road until the 1950s. No electricity and no
telephone. Very little communications.

SV: What about churches?

AM: You probably talked to Al Wise, and Vic, his brother. They lived over on Glacier . . .and my
uncle, Reuben. We would get together, and it was a conglomeration. There were Lutherans and
Baptists, and there were the Mennonite and whatever. Whoever considered themselves
Christian would get together. We would get together in homes, that was a frequent thing.
There was a while when we met in the Community Center. But the problem in the wintertime
was heat, until you got the building warmed up, and then church was over with. So we held
church in different homes. The Wise’s, both of them . . . at first Al’s were held at Salmon Prairie
and Vic’s at Glacier. Each had their own thing, kind of a Bible study, and they would sing. If they
had an organ, my mother was there! She played the organ and piano. She was self taught.

SV: What advice would you have for young people moving to an area like the Swan, or the Swan
itself, which is more rural and isolated?

AM: You’ve got to be able to love yourself! (laughter) In other words, when you are isolated
and far from other people, being alone is one of the things you’ve got to accept. You’ve got to
love yourself, because . . . well, people ask me how I can work on a lookout (Gene has been a
lookout for the Forest Service at Blue Mountain for 35 years). And I tell them, “I grew up that
way.” You’ve got to be able to entertain yourself. You’ve got to be able to take care of yourself,
prepare your own food and do whatever needs to be done. It’s you that has to take care of it,
and be sure that you are willing and able to do that, because nobody else is going to do that for
you. So you have to be very independent.

SV: The Swan, of course, doesn’t seem that isolated now. But there are those people who move
there, and it’s a foreign culture.

[End of Interview]