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This is an interview with William MacDonald by Kim Taylor in Missoula, Montana for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project on July 9, 1984. OH#133-65

KT Can you give us a brief biographical sketch?

WM Well, my name is William Z. MacDonald. When I jumped I was just referred to as Bill MacDonald. Presently, I'm teaching at the Missoula County High School, more specifically at the Missoula Vocational Technical Center. I'm an instructor and forestry technician for them and I've been there for twenty years now and during the summers I still work for the Forest Service and I work as an aerial observer and assistant forest dispatcher on the Lolo Forest. I was raised in Illinois and I came to Montana and Idaho in 1952 for my first season with the Forest Service and became aware of the smokejumper program in Missoula, and then applied the following year which was 1953 and came out here to jump. And that particular season, 1953 was a rather severe fire season. I was able to make nineteen jumps that year and the salary at that time, $1.65 an hour, enabled me to have enough money to go back to school. The wages at that particular time in the area that I was raised in were not adequate really to support my education. In 1953 when I returned home, I enlisted in the service and was in for three years and I came back because of the opportunities that were available here in Missoula. I returned here to Missoula and continued my jumping career and continued my education career until I completed my degrees and began teaching.

KT So what were you studying in school?

WM I was studying forestry.

KT And how did you decide to come to Montana to work for the Forest Service?

WM I've always enjoyed working outside and I've always pictured a place like Montana, Wyoming, Washington as being an ideal place to live, you will find that the mountains, the opportunity to work outside were the primary reasons for coming here.

KT What was it exactly that got you interested in smokejumping?

WM In 1952, I was making a $1.35 an hour and I managed to make $500 that summer and I had seen the movie, "Red Skies Over Montana" which was a big attraction. I also found out that they were paid a $1.65 an hour, I also found out that there was a great deal of overtime which was the reason that the following year I applied for the jumping program and was accepted. And in that particular year, I made $1500 in a fourteen-week period at about $1.65 an hour and I figured it out later on that during the fourteen week period at that particular per hourly rate that I had worked an average of 65 to 70 hours per week which more than supplied me with enough money to continue my education.
KT: Now was this with overtime wages at that time?

WM: No, at that time they paid a straight hourly wage for every hour that we worked. There was no hazards' pay, there was no time and a half break, as they have now-a-days.

KT: What was your first training jump like?

WM: That first training jump doesn't really stick out in my mind that much. I know where the jump was made and I don't remember that much about it, other than where it was made. Probably the third jump that I made was the one that was most vivid in my mind because it was out of a Trimotor Ford and we were jumping in an area, in the Nine Mile Valley and we were running into some thunderstorm activity. We were running into downpours, showers then, a little rough air and everything and it made me extremely uncomfortable and that was probably the first time I asked myself what was I ever doing jumping and standing in the door of a plane. Actually, I wished that if I had had the chance, I could have backed out of it probably, but I wasn't about to. That stands out perhaps more vividly in my mind than any event or jumps I've ever made.

KT: How did the actual jump go?

WM: It went good once we got out of the rainstorm and everything, we got out into the clear area, the jump was fine. It was being in that door and having that airplane tossing around, having the rain hit your leg and get you soaking wet and everything like that. I remember that more vividly than perhaps any other jump.

KT: What did your friends and family think about you being a smokejumper?

WM: Well, I had always been the smallest one in the family and at that particular time, when I came out here I only weighed 130 pounds, the $400 that I had the previous year to go schooling wasn't really that much, you know, to live as they referred to at that time, "high on the hog", and I've always been a go-getter despite the size and everything, and to me it was a challenge. And I would think a lot of people were surprised that, of my size and height and everything, that I would go and that I would be able to do that kind of work, considering the nature of the work and the number of hours that we were required to put in and everything. I think my dad was very much surprised. In fact, when my dad died about three years ago, there was only one picture in his wallet and that was a picture that my mother had given of me in a smokejumper's uniform, so that made me feel that all of those years from the early '50's to the early '80's that he had been carrying that one picture around.

KT: But you didn't get any feelings of apprehension or anything like that?
WM No, no, not really.

KT Can you remember your first fire jump?

WM That's kind of a coincidence because just less than two weeks ago I went back to the areas where I made my first jumps by taking a boat trip down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. And the first fire jump that I made was on a ridge on a main fork of the Salmon and there was a crew of eight of us that were sent to McCall, Idaho in a Trimotor Ford and when we got there, we were in a sense backing up McCall, Idaho, jumpers. And we were sent to this particular fire with the idea of first, that we were going to jump on the fire in the initial attack and after having gotten on the ground on the fire, we found out that the fire was basically under control and our feelings were that McCall wanted somebody to help 'em mop up the fire which we did for the next eight days or so. It wasn't really an initial attack on the fire, on that first fire jump.

KT Are there any other fires that really stand out in your mind?

WM Yeah, probably the one fire that stands out most in my mind was actually a fire that I didn't jump on and that was the "Sleeping Child" fire in either '60 or '61. There are a crew of five of us that jumped on two fires in the Bitterroot. Three of us went to one fire and two to the other. And that evening the winds came up, then I can remember getting up sometime after dark, seeing all the glow or flames on the horizon, and it appeared to be that this was within our fire area. And I got up and walked over to the edge of the line to see if we were having any problems within the fire line and all of a sudden it dawned on me that down over the ridge, what we were really looking at was "Sleeping Child". At that time, of course, we didn't know it was the "Sleeping Child" fire, but I went back and woke up the other two guys and we sat on that ridge and we watched "Sleeping Child" blow up and for those that were jumping in the '60's are probably very well aware what the "Sleeping Child" was. I don't remember what the exact acreage was, but it was one of the larger fires in the Bitterroot in perhaps a ten or fifteen year period down there. It was one which was hit by frontal systems, changing wind patterns, and a number of other factors. If I'm not correct, or if I'm not mistaken, that fire actually did not really go out to sometime late in the fall when the rains hit it and everything.

KT Were there men on that fire?

WM There were some men that were run in on the ground, but as I, if I remember correctly, because of the wind conditions that came up after we jumped, they weren't able to put jump crews initially on it and it was approaching dark at that time, which limited the use of the jumpers. There may have been some jumpers that were dropped on it, but I don't recall that that was so.
KT Had you had previous fire fighting experience before you were a smokejumper?

WM I had, I mentioned the first year that I came to Montana or Idaho, I worked on the St. Joe National Forest. And when I returned to school that fall and they had a very severe fire season for the midwest conditions and I worked with the state of Illinois around the Shawnee National Forest in Illinois, all that fall. I was able to work in the evenings, able to work on weekends and everything and that fire experience was probably what enabled me to qualify for a jumper at that particular time because fire experience was a qualification.

KT Are there any training experiences that you remember?

WM Yeah, I can remember what we used to call the "pot." Individual jumpers, especially the old men, would put in a silver dollar into what was called the "pot". And the jumper that landed closest to the X mark on the ground, got the pot and it was the only occasion that I can remember that I ever came in a near accident situation coming down in the air. It's understood by my jump partner since he was heavier than I was that obviously after a certain period of time that he would pass me up and he would have the right of way once he got beneath me and it would be up to me to steer away from him if it was necessary. However, I lost track of him at one point, and he apparently was behind me and underneath me and I had a clear shot at the "pot" and I was aiming for the "pot" and totally disregarded where his position was at that time and at the very last minute, I heard the speaker from the ground saying something, yelling something about, "Turn right, turn right!" There were two of us in the air at the time and I assumed they were referring to him, I wasn't even able to see his position, but within a very... matter of several seconds, very quickly I realized that he was right directly underneath me and about the time his feet hit the ground, my feet landed on top of his chute, that just took the air away from my chute and I fell right down through his canopy blindfolded and I don't know how far I fell, I was somewhere between fifteen and twenty feet, completely blindfolded without any support from the chute and I think that was my 49th jump and the landing damaged some tendons and ligaments in the knee and I wasn't able to make the 50th jump the next day, I had to wait over a month for my leg to heal so I was able to go and make the 50th jump and I was disappointed because of that.

KT Did you win the pot?

WM No, neither of us won the pot. I thought I had it, but I lost it for sure there, but the next day was supposed to have been the 50th jump and I was really looking forward to it and of course I mentioned that I had to wait better than a month for my leg to heal up before I was able to go back and make that 50th jump.

KT Did you ever encounter any other injuries during the time as
a jumper?

WM No, I feel I was quite lucky. That right knee that I
injured at that particular time, I had strained it on one other
jump, but it really wasn't significant, but from that time on, I
was always having problems with the knee if I overworked it too
much, it would bother me. In fact, it still bothers me today if
I overwork it too much.

KT Did you do project work between heavy fire time?

WM Yeah, it depended on the season. Early in my jumping, which
would be in the early '50's, and late 50's most of the project
for the first year men, was doing piling brush and a few other
chores like that. Later on, in the '60's, early '60's, I should
say even the late '50's for that matter, I was on a spruce bud
worm project in Butte and I worked as what they referred to
as an assistant unit biologist. We were involved in checking the
development stages for Douglas Spruce bud worm in what they
called the continental unit, I believe. And one other year, I
worked at the Binea Ranger Station with another jumper on a
timber crew and we would go out and mark timber and some days we
would go over and scale logs and for two summers, for project
work, I worked as a rigger right there in Missoula, in the loft
and we were packing chutes and packing up the cargo chutes and
return cargo chutes and things of this nature.

KT So how did the, how did it work with the project work when
you had fires?

WM We apparently, it depended on the district, some districts
would, if we had fires, if they had fires on districts, would
even send us out to what we call groundpound fires, walk into
fires, but as far as making a comparison between liking project
work as opposed to fires?

KT Uh, how did they, when fires came up, how did they call you
back?

WM OK. It depended on their need, in some cases if the fire
situation on the district was more demanding than it was on the
regional basis, we were actually used, as I started to mention,
as groundpounders, walking on into fires. That happened on
several occasions. Your position on the list dictated whether
you were called in and whether you were going to be called in
temporarily or overnight or something on this basis. I know some
nights we were called in when needed, perhaps maybe at six in the
evening and then stayed there two to three hours and then were
told to go back to project the next day, so it depended on how
far you were from Missoula as to how often they would call you or
whether they would actually send you back out within a matter of
several hours or a day or even a week. It would just count on the
nature of the fires, the numbers of fires, or the fire severity.

KT What kind of off-duty activities did you partake in?
WM Well, in the first year that I jumped in 1953, as I mentioned, we worked anywhere, according to my calculations, someplace on the average between 65 and 70 hours. The only off-duty activity that I really had an opportunity to do was to go to Glacier Park and that was the weekend that our fire training ended and the following Monday we immediately were sent out on fires and from then until somewhere around the 15th of September, I can remember having one weekend off. And in later years when I returned and jumped for five more consecutive years, I was married at that time, and my activity was really more or less tied to my family at that particular time.

KT The time that you were gone between '53 and '57, when you came back to smokejumping, did you notice any differences in the way it was run?

WM Well, the primary difference was probably in the facilities. When I was jumping in '53, they were using Hale Field, which is the present location of the Missoula County High School. They used the Nine Mile Camp Menard site as a training base and we were in barracks during the fire season in Fort Missoula in the actual old fort buildings. When I returned in 1957 to jump, the aerial fire depot had been constructed and at first they had a dorm situation there, they had a kitchen facility, they had a large, what everybody refers to as the loft now, in addition to the fire warehouse out there. So rather than being scattered about in three different positions or locations like that, everything was centralized. It was a little cleaner and neat to keep track of. As an example, if we had a fire call and we were working at the Fort, maybe working on chutes or something, we would have to drive all the way into Hale Field in order to make a jump. And then, of course, too, our meals were cooked at the Fort, we would have to drive lunch time back into the Fort and so forth, so it consumed a lot of your time driving back and forth whereas at the fire depot, everything was concentrated. It made it a lot easier, I think, it brought everybody together in one place.

KT Were the basic operations about the same?

WM No, they had changed a little more. My recollection of jumping in '53 was of an outfit that wasn't really highly structured, it was very easy to accomplish what you wanted to accomplish or what they wanted to accomplish in many cases, I should say. But my return in '57, everything was more structured. There were dorm rules, there were a great deal more regulations that we were, that were applied to our activities and everything. But when we were out living at the Fort, so to speak, there was no mother there to take care of us or anything like. There wasn't somebody there to inform you that you couldn't leave your boots under the bed or anything like this or you had to pick up your dirty clothes or something like that. In 1953, we were so busy, when we were living out at the Fort, we didn't really even have lockers to hang our clothes in. It was the barest of facilities and I remember having two cardboard
boxes, one on one side of the bed that was for dirty clothes, and one on the other side was for dirtier clothes because we didn't have the opportunity to run down to buy new clothes at that time, I didn't. I found it was actually, when you had the time, we didn't go to a laundromat, we just went down and got new clothes and that's where this dirty and dirtier box came about.

KT With the rules and regulations, did you see any change in the attitudes of the jumpers?

WM Yeah, I did and it's real hard to probably describe everything. I can remember in 1953 that it was loose and free and I didn't, at that particular time, see any type of a conflict between individuals and overhead. But in 1957 when I returned, everything was so structured that there was obviously conflicts and they were pretty evident. There were individuals who had their little pocket, or their little room, or their little area of responsibility and when that always happens, there's always conflicts between where there's an overlap between maybe some type of situation where two people may have opposing views about it and that wasn't evident to me in 1953. I think one of the big reasons, perhaps was that we were so busy in 1953, that they didn't have time to get involved in little petty things like that.

KT Do you remember any specific characters that you worked with?

WM Oh, yeah, everyone that I jumped with was a character. Ah, yeah, most of 'em, I'll probably see them at the reunion, but there's a lot of 'em that were characters and it's been now what, uh... 31, 31 years ago and so many of the names are lost. One of them that will probably always stand out is George Ostrom, he was kind of a dandy. He always had little quaint phrases that went with all of our activities that, they're phrases that are just peculiar to jumping and those people wouldn't understand 'em. On some occasions he would wear a little kepi, type of cap, similar to the French foreign legion, to keep the sun off the back of his neck and that was kind of a trademark and I can remember that. I remember Fred Brauer and "his good deals" and if anybody was jumping back when Fred was, they would know about what we referred to as Fred Brauer's "good deals". Fred knows what we're talking about, too.

KT Was there a certain smokejumper mentality?

WM In one sense of the word, yes. When everybody was in the airplane and we were going to a fire, I suspect you would say, there was a typical mentality, but back on the ground, not on a fire, everybody was just as diverse as they were any other time. That's one of the strangest things that... everybody was so completely different, there was such a wide range of personalities involved, despite the fact, you know, that I spent three years in the service, I can't say that I saw that wide range of personalities in the service, that I did in the jumpers
and that's because apparently it pulled in people from just about every State in the Union involved in jumping. Whereas in the service, when I was in the service in the East, most of the people I became associated with were from a smaller geographical area, but there were people in there from Tennessee and South Carolina, from Maryland, Texas, Albuquerque, New Mexico, I can remember, there were quite a few of the ones that I trained with. It brought in a wider range of individuals, most of 'em were crazy, though.

KT Were most of these students, as well?

WM Yeah, at that particular time, most of the ones that I remember were students, university students. There were still a few people that were there that had been by there in World War II airborne or in the airborne in Korea. I can remember several that were World War II airborne and at least one that was Korean Airborne.

KT OK, what was the usual fire procedure when you were called on a fire?

WM Oh, there's two different periods that I mentioned, the 1953 and the '57 through '61 that I jumped. In 1953, which was the most difficult one to remember, if we were engaged in working at Hale Field in either preparing fire packs or doing some of this other pre-fire work, it was just a matter of somebody coming outside and saying, "We got a fire," and calling off the names of the individuals and then we would get our gear and of course, the aircraft was right there outside at Hale Field. In '57 and '58, I spent the fire seasons in Grangeville, Idaho, which was a small base manned by Missoula for the Nez Perce Forest down there and in that particular situation, it was just a call over the telephone. The foresters called the parachute loft out north of town and we were just informed verbally. Later on, in the latter part of my career jumping, they were using a P.A. system at the Aerial Fire Depot. They would announce the individual's names that were going to a fire and they had, either some type of a short alarm system or one that sounded very similar to a warning in a submarine that they were trying to do the dive, in other words, they had a very distinct audio-signal out there that we could understand and hear and you knew it was specifically a fire call. We had one unusual system when we were working down in Grangeville, Idaho. The forest had their forest radio transmitter in one of the back rooms on the parachute loft and occasionally one of us would sit in there and listen and we could hear an outlying ranger district requesting smokejumpers from the forest office and when we heard that, we would run outside, we'd untie the airplane, get into our gear, and be in the airplane when the call came into the office and all the individual did then was just put the location of it on and fill that information and run out and hand us, one of us in the aircraft and then the airplane would taxi out on the runway and take off, and we were getting getaway times that were down to like two minutes and we were never really certain whether the forest dispatcher down
there, by the name of Paul Strand, ever figured out what was going on.

KT So were the planes all geared up before you-?

WM Yeah, we had our jumper, we would have the fire gear in the aircraft and it was a two-man aircraft, it'd only carry two jumpers and so those particular jumpers would have their gear laid out on the ground so that all we had to do was run out there and the other individuals would help 'em get right into their gear and we were getting getaway times, I think that our fastest one was about two minutes and I don't think the forest was ever able to figure out why we were able to get off the ground so fast.

KT What was the hairiest fire you were ever on?

WM I don't know that I ever had any real fire that I ever thought was real hairy. Uh, the fires never bothered me. If anything bothered me, it would have been the air conditions during the time when jumping. I can remember lots of fires that were... you wish you weren't there at that particular time. I think the fastest rate of spread of a fire that I ever saw that amazed me and kind of baffled us and put us in a real bad situation was a fire, actually in grass and widely scattered ponderosa pine over around Hot Springs, South Dakota. The fire had started the night before we arrived there and there were forty to fifty mile an hour winds and a lightning storm and that fire in that grass, on some occasion when the wind would come up would be burning faster than you could run and I know we initially tried attacking with hand tools and you couldn't keep up with the fire, just even to, shoveling through just a very thin fuels like the grass. And we were signed as "overhead" on that particular fire and we ended up taking our levi jackets off and starting to beat the fire out and we could make faster progress than we could with hand tools. But then as we watched the fire up ahead of us, we realized that wasn't even going to be adequate enough. We finally just backed off onto a county road, we were just double-timing along the road, trying to keep up with the fire, throwing matches, and it became, we became aware of the fact that we weren't able to move that fast. Two or three of the guys ran on ahead about a half mile and began doing the same thing, we were running short of matches and everything, and they thought, well, if they ran down the road about a half mile and got ahead of us and started doing the same thing, we would probably be more effective. And the fire unfortunately, jumped the road behind them and we immediately stopped because we'd had nothing but fire on both sides of the road in front of us and we stopped at a particular point, it was a small side road to the left, and moved across to that area, using it as kind of a barrier between us and the fire the way it jumped the road in front of us. And the other crew finally became aware of the fact that the fire had jumped the road behind them and they saw that the only place for them to go was a dry reservoir located about a half mile off to their, what would be our left and we were
standing up on a little rise watching and cheering and yelling at 'em because we knew they were gonna have to move a little bit to get over to that dry reservoir and at first they were walking quite fast and had their tools in their hands and everything and as they kept going and looking at the fire behind 'em burning through the grass, they realized they were gonna have to move a little faster and so there were a few tools discarded and when they finally made it to the edge of the reservoir, there wasn't a tool in the hand of anybody and they had run right out onto the dry mud flats, out at the upper end of the reservoir where it was dry and they had to run quite a ways out onto the mud there to get out of the way of the flames. And it was one of those situations where, if they had ran back through the flames, they probably would have got a little singe or something like that, but there was nobody in any real danger of getting hurt or anything, but it was... we were up on the hill, laughing because when we realized how it was kind of fun to see them get chased by those flames back up across there, half mile or so into that reservoir.

KT Did you.... earlier you mentioned, the jump where you ran into the other fellow when you were landing, did you ever have any other problems while you were jumping?

WM No, that particular problem was the most serious one because of the fact that I completely lost track of where he was and I had one other occasion where another jumper pulled underneath me on a fire, but I was aware of it and I was able to steer away from him without coming any closer than perhaps, within 100 feet of him, but most of the jump that I had, I had a good opening on the chutes and I don't recall ever having any kind of a malfunction or any type of a real severe landing or anything of that sort. I felt quite ruffian to making over 50 jumps without having any real serious injuries.

KT Do you remember your last jump?

WM I think I remember the last jump and the reason for it was because it was late in the fall and it was a jump in the Bob Marshall, sometime after the 15th of September, and I jumped with a new man that I didn't even know, I hadn't met him before until we got in the airplane. And, immediately on getting on the ground, we got hit by a rain shower and by the time we got up to our small little fire, it was practically, totally out, we actually had to put some wood on the fire in order to get warm to dry our clothes out and everything. And it continued to rain perhaps, maybe about 6 or 7 in the evening I suggested that we had two choices, one was to stay there and get under the plastic which we had to cover our gear with and to put around our sleeping bags before we had an opportunity to walk about four miles downhill to a Forest Service cabin and I pointed out to him that we didn't have a Forest Service key to get into the cabins. In general, most of the cabins had a means for getting into 'em if you'd look around, you might have to crawl under and perhaps knock a floor board out or maybe go in through some other areas.
of the cabin that wasn't that well-protected and everything. And the individual indicated his choice would be to go down the road to the cabin and we went down to the cabin. It took us better than an hour and a half to get into the cabin, but we didn't damage the cabin in any way, we were able to finally get in it and stay overnight. Laying there that night, inside that cabin, we were hearing the elk bugling, it was that cold and rainy out, it was that late in the season, and that was perhaps a very easy jump to remember.

KT What was your most memorable jump?

WM I guess the training jumps, so fun that I didn't get on the drop list, that was probably the most memorable. It taught me a lesson and of course, that was the only time I really injured myself to the extent that I wasn't able to work.

KT How about fire, is there, what was your most memorable fire?

WM Fire or fire jump?

KT Fire jump.

WM OK, I think perhaps my most favorable fire jump was jumping in California, going down there and jumping on a fire on the Shasta-Trinity. I was not that familiar with the vegetation down there in California and we were given a choice of landing in the timber or landing in this brush. And I felt landing in the timber down there, which looked quite tall, would be a lot of work and I was one of those that chose to land in the brush where it was adjacent to it and it wasn't until I got down on the ground that I actually found out that the brush was at least ten to fifteen foot tall and the people that were landing in the trees were having no problem getting their chutes out, but it took me better than about two hours to get mine out of the brush and get it all packed up because of the density of the brush and the size of it.

KT What was the most memorable fire?

WM I was talking about that fire in South Dakota, it was perhaps the most memorable fire, one in which started on a Sunday evening, very high temperatures and winds and then weather from... I think that's perhaps the most rapid rate of spread on a fire that I've ever witnessed. A person just saw light flashing, what they referred to as 'extreme fuels' and I wasn't aware completely that a fire could spread as fast as that one did. Your helpless, it was with hand tools, and you're normally, you know, constructing a fire line removing the fuel from the fire, but in that particular case, the fire was moving so fast through the fuel that there was just no way you could construct a fire line by conventional hand methods.

KT Now 1961 was a pretty big fire year, too, right?
WM I don't recall. That was my last year and I don't recall. That was the year that I spent on a project out of Binea and I remember that, plus I believe "Sleeping Child", that was probably the two big events of that year. I don't recall, personally, that that was a very "good," fire season.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

KT What were the basic after-fire procedures?

WM I'm not certain I know what you mean by after-fire.

KT Once you got the fire under control?

WM Following the control of the fire we were usually involved in the mopping-up process which of course is just going back through and working from the edge of the fire back in and putting out anything that was still burning, dropping snags. I think you're talking about mop-up which was of course, the dirtiest part of the job. It was one of those necessities. and one time we, I should say earlier than [in] my particular career, they were attempting to use jumpers primarily as initial attack and then they would pull jumpers off and replace 'em with somebody else to do the greater portion of the mop-up. And then following the control of the fire usually went almost immediately right into the mop-up stage where they would work their way in, as I said, from the outside putting anything out that was still burning and dropping, the snags or anything that would endanger the line.

KT So from that point, you mopped up, and how did you get back down?

WM OK, there would be a difference on how large the fire is and how many individuals were on the fire and everything. It would vary from packing your gear which would include your fire equipment and your unused food and your parachuting equipment and everything would be.... Initially, it was put into what they call the seamless beamless cloth sack which was then tied down to what we refer to as a clack frame, which was just a very simple frame made out of ash with two straps, and then packing that of course, off the fire. Later on, of course when they had helicopters available, there were a number of occasions where I can remember being taken off fires with helicopters and on one particular occasion we walked down to the Salmon River and there was a jet boat, or two jet boats for that matter, and they took us about twenty-five miles from [inaudible] bar to the end of the road in the cornfield. So there were many different ways to get off, but the primary way was walking. They would walk in, up to, I doubt if they would carry the gear both times, in more than about seven to eight miles where they would actually use it. You may have to walk further than that, but usually the gear itself was not packed in more than say seven miles, or eight miles.
KT Did you use radios on your fires?

WM No, on the smaller fires there was never a radio, that is, if it was called a two-man fire. On some of the larger fires, obviously they dropped a great deal of us in. It wasn't until the early '60's where we were getting a radio going in with the group say of maybe five individuals. And of course, nowadays on some fires with two men now, they're carrying these small portables which of course weren't available at the particular time that I was jumping.

KT What kind of chutes were you using?

WM You know, having been a rigger for two summers, I should remember my chutes, but we were using the standard 28 foot chute in 1953 through perhaps about 1958 and sometime in around 1958, I believe, they started changing to a 32 foot chute. And later on, of course, the development now, I'm not even certain what the skirt diameter, but I continued to use the 28 footer because of my weight. There was a period of time where they were both the 28 and the 32 foot chutes available and I think they were designated at that time, FS-3 and FS-5, and all through my career that I did jump, I think only on one occasion with the FS-5 which was the 32 foot chute. And that was when somebody put it on as a joke in a training, a training jump and I was up there floating around, everybody had gotten down on the ground and I was still floating around. I think there was a three man stick that jumped and then the other two guys were on the ground and I was still hanging up in the air with a 32 foot chute.

KT So what kind of difference was there in the response of the chute?

WM Well, slower rate of descent because of the larger canopy and everything. But supposedly, and that's the one thing that I can't pinpoint down. It had a faster rotation time or you could make, I think, a 180 degrees in something like seventy seconds or 360 degrees in seventy seconds or something like that which was much better than I can remember some of the 28 foot chutes that were using. Basically, they were built the same, they had the Derry slots and they had the tails, and that was about... the only other difference I can remember would be the means of attaching to the harness at the end. When I first started jumping, they have what they call a single-point harness in which all of the straps come across the shoulder and through the crotch all joined to it, a large metal box in the very center of the unit, and later on they went to the so-called "three-point harnesses", two straps that fasten across the groin and one that fastened across the chest, that's why they referred to it as a three-point harness. And that three-point harness was what were equipped with what they call cape latch which is a quick release device where the risers from the chute were simply clipped into that quick release device up on the shoulder which meant that if you had to get out of the chute for some reason or other by getting down from a tree, it made it much easier than with the
three point or four point or three point, excuse me, single point harness. With a single point harness, you left the harness up in the tree along with the chute and when it got to the three point harnesses you were able to... there was one procedure that they actually wear the harness all the way to the ground which was a lot easier procedure to... There was a period of time when they were using that particular three point harness and the capewells in which they changed their procedures and on one particular occasion I remember one individual, whose name I won't mention, that got the procedures mixed up and made 'em or attempted to make the let-down procedure and he tied the rope off in such a way that when he released himself, he actually had tied himself only to his harness and he went all the way to the ground with his harness. The correct procedure would have been to tie each rope to the chute and he got confused on the two procedures and ended up going all the way down to the ground. Of course, he ended up getting a fractured collar bone, this was actually on a fire jump, it wasn't that serious of an injury, but for many years it was a joke, that he was gonna be put on the training staff and teaching let-down procedures.

KT Were there any planes, specific planes that you preferred?

WM Oh yeah, I have my pictures downstairs of the Travelaire, 447-W. I have several pictures of it because we had it the two summers I was in Grangeville. I preferred it to the Doug, and to the ATLM or the Twin Beches and, but if I'd had my choice for all of the jumps, I would have jumped out of the Ford because it was a slower aircraft, more confident in flying in it, the exiting speed on the Ford was about half of that that it was on the Dougs, the C-46's. It was much more comfortable to ride in, it was a... I felt that it would get you there and the Doug was always a little too fast for me to take on, but the old Trimotor just tugged away and as I have mentioned, you could go out and go about 65 mph as opposed to something like a 120 with the Dougs. It made a difference in the opening shock on the chutes.

KT How do you think being a smokejumper affected your other career choices?

WM I think the, the biggest thing that I got out of smokejumping was the challenge and knowing that I had done something that I wasn't too certain I could do when I first started out. To me, it was a big challenge. Of all the things that I did then, jumping probably gave me more confidence in attacking work or jobs or something later in life. It gave me a sense of accomplishment and a sense of confidence, probably the two big factors.

KT Are there any other stories that you would like to share?

WM Most of the stories that I can remember I don't think I ought to put on tape. We'll save somebody else some embarrassment.
KT Do you have... are there any comparisons you'd like to make with smokejumping today as compared to what it was twenty years ago.

WM Thirty years ago, for me.

KT Thirty years ago.

WM Thirty years ago and twenty, it depends on the period of time. I'm glad I jumped then, that's perhaps the only thing. I'm glad I jumped then.

KT What kind of differences do you notice in the way it's run now?

WM Well, it's too structured for one thing. And more recent attempts to disperse the jumpers to smaller units has obviously done a lot to the morale of the jumpers that they have up until now, particularly those that are referring to themselves as "career jumpers", I think it's really hurt their morale and I think it goes in the wrong direction as far as personnel management has gone, they may save a few bucks as they always say and everything, but I think they're losing a lot of people's... they're losing the confidence and the trust and respect of a lot of people there that have given quite a bit of themselves to the job. I hate to see that happen.

KT Are there any other comments you would like to make about your experiences in smokejumping?

WM No, if Martin [inaudible] ever hears this... I remember... or I learned how to count with Martin [inaudible] on the first fire jump that I ever went on.

KT What do you mean by learn how to count?

WM I'll let it pass. Martin and the other seven individuals on the fire that maybe will understand what that is.

KT OK. Well, I would really like to thank you for this interview.

[END OF TAPE]