Interview with Stan Sykes by Sandra Carroll on 21 July 1984 for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project. OH #133-104.

SC  This is Sandra Carroll interviewing Stan Sykes on July 21, 1984. Stan was a smokejumper from 1946 to 1949 and he was assigned to Missoula/Nine Mile. [INTERRUPTION] ... at Nine Mile. So were you... besides being a smokejumper, did you work for the Forest Service?

SS  No, but I worked for the Park Service and I worked on a couple forest fires for them.

SC  And what did you do before you were a smokejumper?

SS  Oh, just on a road crew... common laborer.

SC  What about afterwards?

SS  Afterwards, I [was] a railroad brakeman for thirty five years.

SC  So, how... what got you into smokejumping?

SS  Oh, my brother said he knew where I could get a job. I didn't have that one at that time. Having just gotten fired from the last one. He said I'd have to work, and I said: "Well, where is it?" "You can go over and be a smokejumper." And I said: "Well, who do you write to?" He gave me the address. He was a forestry major over here.

SC  At the University?

SS  Yeah. So I wrote them a letter and here came a telegram: "Get over here, right now."

SC  Is this in 1945, then?

SS  '46.

SC  In '46. OK.

SS  So, here I came, right away. It was about... I think it was June 19, I'm not sure.

SC  That's all right. They said then... they sent you a telegram telling you they wanted you to come?

SS  Uh-huh.

SC  And did you immediately get inducted in?

SS  Yep. Everything just fell into place right now, like they was waiting for me.

SC  And did you go to Nine Mile then?
SS Yeah. I went to Nine Mile. And the first day I arrived there, why... we didn't do anything in the morning except told where we lived and stuff, like the barracks and such. And in the afternoon, we's suppose to go up about three miles up in the hill and saw logs. And we had two man teams, and I was invited to go with Carrol Reick, he was an ex-paramarine. And he was a fine boy. And we were sawing a log on a side road up about a quarter mile from the creek, and it was quite a ways up there and quite steep... forty-five degrees. A guy came along in this forest green outfit and said; "How are you boys doing?" "Fine." And he says; "Pretty hot day." "Yeah. We ran out of water, would you mind getting us a bag full?" "Oh! Well, OK." And geez, that's quite a walk down to that creek and quite a lot of walking back up with a bag of water. And he came back up a-panting and puffing about twenty minutes later and gave us our water. He told us not to saw our legs off, then he went on. We didn't know who he was. And about... later that night, we found out that he was Earl Cooley, who was in charge of the whole outfit. That's my first contact with Earl Cooley. [LAUGHTER] But he was very obedient, he toddled right down there and got the water for us. That was no imposition, not much. We was too lazy to do it, it was too far down there. [laughs]

SC So, that's what your first did...

SS Yup.

SC ... they sent you up to saw logs and stuff?

SS Yeah.

SC What other kind of training did they give you?

SS Oh, they trained us how to jump out of the airplanes, and land, let down from trees, the same old stuff they do now. I don't think that training has changed a bit, really.

SC What... what appealed to you about being a smokejumper? Was it just that you needed a job in 1946?

SS Yeah, that appealed to me. I almost didn't think anything at all about the parachute jumping. It's a job.

SC What was it like the first time you jumped out of a plane?

SS Well, the first time I was gonna count to three and I was gonna pull my reserve, if nothing happened. But I just started to say the number one, and I bit my tongue plumb off, pert near, when the thing opened. Never again. I don't count ever again. That... that was the first one. The second one I had an orange in my pocket on my leg, and when my chute opened, the orange did a free-fall down to the ground. And I'm watching that thing go, and I thought; "Gee, that's really pretty. I think that'd be all right to do some day, be free-fall." That was going through my mind when I saw that orange going down like that. I'm still
free-falling right now. Going out to the airport in about five minutes.

SC Really?

SS Oh, yeah.

SC You still do it, then?

SS Yeah.

SC Wow! How many... since 1949, you've still been doing parachuting and free-falling?

SS Oh, yeah... yeah. I never quit.

SC Wow. That's interesting. How many fires did you...

SS Well, we didn't have many fires in those days. The first year I got on five, and the next year I got on five, the next year I didn't make a single fire jump at all. We didn't have any fires, some in 1948.

SC '48.

SS And '49 I made five. I think I had a total of only twenty six jumps in four years. And now a days, some of these guys get that many in one year. So, things are better. [LAUGH] Better or worse, I don't know which.

SC What do you like about jumping out of airplanes?

SS Oh, it's just nice. Nice people, nice fun ego trip, and tension reliever. It's... I don't know, you can... when things are pressing down on you, you can go make a jump and you feel good. And stuff like that.

SC Like a release?

SS Pardon?

SC Like, is it a release when you feel stress and stuff? It's a way of...

SS Yeah. Just like an analyst's couch. Some people people go for an analyst's couch when they get depressed. I go for an parachute jump. It gives you the same... much better feeling.

SC Well, so what was it like once you got down to the ground when you had a fire? Like, one of these jumps that you went on. What would you have to do?

SS Oh, we get out of our chute and... and we'd usually leave our chute right there until we got the fire put down. We'd start hiking towards the fire where ever that was. It was usually was
pretty close around. Go to work.

SC What'd you do when you went to work?

SS Well, usually put a line around the fire, stuff like that. It's moderately hard work. But, of course, in those days to me I didn't figure it was such hard work because you're young and in good health. So it wasn't hard work until after about twelve or fourteen hours, then it was getting hard to get done. But a lot of fires would go on for... you'd be working on them for twenty hours. And before they'd let you off for three or four hours sleep. And I was on a couple and they only let us off two hours off, and then we went right back for another twenty. Those ones sort of got to you, you know. You're just, like, more or less like a zombie walking around.

SC What... do you remember what the fires were. Where the fire were, like one of those twenty hour ones... the shift that you had to work?

SS Gosh... I don't know. One down by Bungalow Ranger station; I think that's on the Clearwater... I can't even remember the old forests out here. And then one in the Deadwood Reservoir country in Idaho.

SC Do you have a favorite fire... I mean, that you have the most memories from?

SS Oh, let's see... well... well, we jumped on a little fire up in the Kaniksu, me and a kid named Leon Davis. I hated him. He was sort of a suck-butt. But he was such an official type guy because he sucking his way to being a foreman, he thought. Got dead and I didn't even care. But, anyway, we jumped in there and there's a little creek running by right there and he didn't even think about it. He's over there, giving me orders right and left and he's just a peon like me. Finally I said: "Leon, you stink." And I went over I dug a ditch over from that little creek over to our fire line and I had a ditch full of water running around our fire. [LAUGH] Then he claimed the credit for it when the... when the ground pounders got there, he went walking around chasing the ranger then telling about how HE figured out that stuff, you know. That was sort of funny.

SC Do you remember when that was... what year it was?

SS '46 or '47, something like that. '46 I think... yeah.

SC Did you like what you did?

SS Yeah... yeah. I always called them "picnics in the mountains." I... I never got into that griping and bitching and moaning and complaining like the other guys did, because I liked to go out and see bigger fish than you'd ever see any other time. Like, on Meadow Creek up in the Flathead, I've seen fifteen pound dolly vardens in six inches of water, and their back is sticking
plumb out of the water. And we're down there catching them by hand. And we didn't know what to do with them after we caught them. I had to let them go back. But there's hundreds of them in no water at all, they'd just be there, you know. And I liked that part. And one time I lit within about ten feet of a black bear. He just was so surprised, he couldn't imagine what was happening, you know. I've been around a lot a bears, and I wasn't worried about a black bear. I could see he was a black bear when I looked about fifty feet. So I wasn't worried about him. But, boy, he got out of there in nothing flat. You know, he was gone. [LAUGH] Those things I really liked. You'd see timber where there's no other white man's had ever been to. And no fishermen, or hunters, had gone and spoiled it with their beer cans and trash and paper. It was really nice, in that respect. So I just thought of it as a picnic in the mountains.

SC Do you think that most of the other men who were with you during that time were looking for jobs, too? Or...

SS Well, I don't know. We had mostly... '46 was the year of the outlaws. They was all ex-paratroopers, or ex-marines, or ex-flyers, or ex-servicemen, and they had a don't-give-a-damn attitude, sort of. They didn't care if anything happened right or wrong, you know, sort of. It was a lot of fun, but they didn't all get invited back the next year, I noticed. Sort of weeded out quite a few of them. [LAUGH] I don't know if it was due to their work attitude, or whether they just didn't want to come back.

SC That was in '46, right after the war?

SS Yeah. Here was all these paratroopers... see, until the Mann Gulch Fire in '49, they had trouble filling positions as smokejumpers. They didn't... couldn't find anybody to be a smokejumper. Then that Mann Gulch Fire came along and all of a sudden, they had two thousand applications within a month after that fire. Due to all the publicity in the newspaper, and Life Magazine, and Time Magazine, and Newsweek, and that stuff. Everybody wanted to get on the glory wagon, then. [LAUGH] Get in on a good deal, you know. But before that, they didn't get a lot of applications so... and since then they've had ten times as many applications as they had jobs.

SC Where you at that fire... the Mann Gulch Fire?

SS No. I got out the day before.

SC Ohhh.

SS I got out the day before with a kid named Lloyd Knapp. And we jumped on a little two-man fire up in the Kaniksu and Myrtle Creek was the name of that fire. And he came down and he lit right on the fire and he crushed his vertebrae. And he got down to the edge of the fire... just a little small fire, about twice as big as this room. But he somehow hit right in the fire. And
I lit about 200 yards away. And when I went up there, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Here's a man laying on the fire, you know, but he had most of the fire out, right around him. But he said, "My back's hurt." And jimmity, we debated there... a terrible amount of down timber, you could walk ten feet off the ground all over that territory and never touch the ground because of all the downed timber. For ages that stuff—those big 150 foot... oh, what's the name of that tree? I don't know now. I could think of it yesterday. Anyway, they'd fall down and then another one falls across them and another one falls across that. And they keep rotting into the ground, but you can walk for miles without touching the ground in that country. Well, we did want to put another jump crew in there to take him out because it's so dangerous. And I kept asking him, being just like an interrogator, "Now, Lloyd are you... can you make it?" "No, I don't think so." He tried to get up, and he couldn't get up. "No, I don't think I can." We waited there about... the airplane just circling around. I went ahead, finally, and put out the emergency signal. And that was hard to put out, too. There wasn't any level ground to put it on. [LAUGH] But anyway, they finally... they dropped a radio, and I think that didn't work too good. But I sent for a stretcher crew. They dropped in... ten of them... Bill Wood. And I was just sure two or three of them would be on stretchers before they got landed. But somehow they all made it in there without getting hurt.

SC Why was this... it was so dangerous because of this...

SS Yeah. Because of all this...

SC ...fallen timber... the downed timber?

SS Yeah. Ground falls on the the ground there.

SC How did you manage to... what was the difference between your jump and Lloyd's jump that put Lloyd in the middle of the fire and...?

SS Oh... I'd....

SC Where you a more experienced jumper than he was?

SC I don't know. I don't think that has anything to do with it. I... just luck... raw luck. You can guide them chutes, but they didn't do much. [LAUGH] They didn't go very far. You didn't have time to take them very far. If you did see a hole, why you didn't have time. Mostly a matter of luck. Maybe down... when you got about 100 feet above the ground, then if you had a hole Why, you could get in it. But, at the same time, it wasn't there, you didn't do it. Well, anyway, they took him out. That was quite a relief. I had to fight... oh, on that fire, all our tools lit up in these trees 150 foot high. I think the lowest one I estimated the tools were only sixty feet above the ground. And so they threw me out some spurs. I never did see them ever. I mean, I saw them falling and I went to look for them, but they
were lost in the woods somewhere. So... and that made me quite happy, because I didn't want to climb one of those trees that... that bad. [LAUGHS] When you climb one of those trees that you can't hardly even get your arms around, then you get up there and then you're suppose to take a saw, I guess, and chop a branch off of that tree. Well, I knew that my belt wouldn't reach around the tree, and I thought, "Well, the heck with this!" But I never found the spurs, so I felt better. Well, I got the fire down to nothing. In fact I had to build a little bit on when the train... plane came back with the... the rescue crew. I had to build the fire up to give them some smoke to let them know where we was at. So, that one was OK. Then, when I got back to Missoula, about three days later, I'm walking around and [INAUDIBLE] was at the... was out at the fairground, that's where we live then. And Hale Field was south of the fairgrounds, of course. Now that's all Missoula city. But, the first thing I saw, was here's this Lloyd Knapp, and he's walking. Boy, right now I thought; "Why you phony rat." You know, but after looking and thinking, "Well...." Then I started asking people about a back injury. Well, I guess you can, you know, you can really... and I've had one since... I've had three of them. You can... you can have your back so bad you can't walk one day and three or four days later why, you can walk. He wasn't walking good, but... [LAUGH] I'd expected to see him in the hospital for six months or so, you know.

SC Is a... is a ten man rescue team the norm for a... an injured smokejumper?

SS I think at that time it was because some of you lug him for a ways and then you get spelled off by the other ones. And you make much more time than if you got six guys all wore out. And so, that's why they used so many.

SC Did you have any other rescues... um, were you on any other fire where there was a rescue.

SS No, wasn't on any more of those. Then there was the Call Mountain fiasco up... I think that was in the South Fork of the Flathead in '47. That was a joke there. Seventy five of us went in on that thing. There's three Doug loads, and I guess there's a couple Ford loads, and there's overhead up to the eyeballs around, and they didn't need us. They had a couple hundred ground pounders came in on it, too. So then the overhead had a big meeting. We were very undisciplined children then. Grumbling, and griping, and not doing anything. And they put us back to a nine to five schedule. Eight hours a days was all we was gonna work. Jimminy, we were use to getting time-and-a-half for overtime, you know. Eight hours a day on a forest fire? We don't want to work on a forest fire! The overhead was all over us and they had a big conference. And we had a jumper named Johnny Frankovich, he was a '46 man. And he was a... sort of a, quiet comedian. But he had a little referee's whistle for basketball games. You'd always here that whistle go off at the wrong time. Some official would make some big announcement and
that whistle would go off. Well, they kept telling us guys what a bunch of bad guys we were and then John would blow his whistle. Well, then they had a big meeting of all the overhead and they took away John's whistle. That made us all mad then. [LAUGH] So, that was quite a fire. Not because of any fire, because of the massive amount of overhead there.

SC Now, did you just work during the... during the season? Or did you....?

SS Yeah. Just during the fire season in the summer.

SC OK. For those three years.

SC What did your family think about you out there smokejumping?

SS Oh... my Mom worried like moms worry. My old man, he didn't seem to have much interest. I don't know whether he had interest or not. When I took up free-falling, why he showed up at the airport one day to watch one of them. Generally, he didn't show a lot of interest at all.

SC Did your Mom worry about you?

SS Oh, yeah. She was still worrying when she passed away and by then, why... about thirty years of jumping in then. That worrying didn't do her any good. [LAUGH]

SC What... what'd she think of you doing it?

SS What'd she think?

SC Yeah.

SS Well, I'm sure that she thought I was gonna get killed.

SC She think you were crazy?

SS No. She didn't think I was crazy. She'd seen me do a lot worse things than that before. [LAUGHTER]

SC What did your friends think? I mean, other than the other smokejumpers... your fellow smokejumpers, what about your friends in town?

SS I don't know. They... "Hey! I always wanted to do that." You know, that same old baloney anyhow.

SC Did they... did they...?

SS I don't think they think very much at all about it.

SC Do you think they had respect for you... for what you were doing? Like, it was pretty courageous?

SS Oh, maybe in the back of their mind. I don't know. No outward show of it. It didn't ever make me a great public
feature. [LAUGH]

SC What did you do, like, weren't... when you were on... when you didn't have a fire, when your at work, going out out for a fire? What was it like?

SS Oh, they usually sent us out on projects. Like, they'd send us out... well, I went to Benchmark in '47. That was called Pretty Prairie then. Pretty Prairie is up the trail about seven more miles, though, I think. I never did get up there, so I don't know. But they'd send you out there clearing trails and working on phone lines, and doing whatever the Ranger wanted you to... the packers wanted you to do. Do stuff like that. That was pretty good fun, but most of them guys sort of had a little jealousy in them. They'd...

SC Yeah, what guys had the jealousy? They guys that weren't the smokejumpers?

SS Yeah, the ground pounders had a lot of jealousy because they'd hired out at SP-3 or 4 and we were getting SP-6 wages, doing the same work. And we'd come in and work right beside them and then when the work got tough, we'd go off and fight a fire somewhere and make a whole lot of overtime and [LAUGH] they'd be stuck doing whatever they were doing. They'd probably go on a fire... I suppose they got overtime, too. I don't know whether they did or not. But they had a little jealousy. They'd usually try to not make our stay any longer than it was necessary, or any more comfortable. But some... there was a couple of places were it was good and a couple places real bad.

SC What do you mean?

SS Oh, where the Ranger or the Boss really gave you a bad time, you know. I had a guy named Shoemaker who was down in... well, in the Bitterroot, there's a place, and I can't even remember the name. Sam Billings was the Ranger. And then we'd go over the hill... Magruder Pass. The first creek down to the bottom was Deep Creek, I think it's called. Well, there's a Ranger's Station... that was in Idaho, right over the pass. And there's a Ranger named Shoemaker there, and he just hated us. He put me on a mess... in the mess. He had thirty six men working there, he had one woman who was the cook, and I was the mess boy. [For] thirty six people, you'd ordinarily have about four of them. And the first day I worked around the clock. And I went up to him and told him, "I worked around the clock, I'd sure like to sleep." He said, "You get back in the kitchen and do your job." Well, I went back in the kitchen and fell asleep while I was working... fell asleep while I was standing up! At the end of that day, why I said, "You'd better get some help in the kitchen. I'm not working tomorrow." I said, "I've all ready got in forty hours this week and I've been working two days." "You get back in the kitchen, you're working. When I tell you to quit you'll quit." And I said to him, "No. You won't tell me when to quit. I quit right now." And, anyway, that kept me out of some jumps
down at South Dakota that Brauer had arranged for me. They were having a sky diver exhibition in South Dakota, but I got terminated because of that Shoemaker four days early. So that made me bitter. I'm glad to hear he's dead right now. I wish he had died thirty years earlier. [LAUGH] But he put me in the kitchen and worked me around the clock. I don't know what was on his mind, but all the rest of the jumpers told him, "Well, you can't work a guy like that." "I can work him any way I want to." I don't know how the other guys made out with him, but he just decided I was gonna be his pet that day. Up 'till I had a very good recommendation from his Assistant Ranger, Smokey Stover, and that didn't mean anything. [LAUGH]

SC Well, did you, when you were with... was there a real separation between the smokejumpers, like, when you were out on these projects and the ground pounders? When... did you guys all sort of hang out together and...?

SS Oh, yeah. Usually we were pretty much one unit by ourselves. But if they needed some men for this or that... usually they... the reason they used us was because they didn't have any men of their own. But... so there wasn't that much intermingling. But, yeah. We'd have bosses... we always had their bosses, and they'd just be sort of in charge. We'd have a... usually, if there was six of us, why... or so, one of our squad leaders was sort of in charge of us. But he wouldn't have anything to do with the boss or anything. He was just another working man.

SC When you were out on these projects, would you, like, stay out there?

SS Oh, yeah. Like, I was up at Benchmark for three weeks, or so. And I was up at Spotted Bear for three weeks. I was down in the Bitterroot the whole Summer. We didn't have any fires in '48, and so after training, why, off I went to the Bitterroot and stayed down there all that time. I must have been down there two months... two and a half months.

SC Well, when you were down there and you were with other smokejumpers on these projects and then when you had time off, would you smokejumpers just stay together as opposed to mixing in with the regular Forest Service crews?

SS No, I didn't...

SC Socially, sometimes, like, afterwards.

SS ... oh, to some extent, you did, because you knew each other a lot better, you know. But, heck. If I was going swimming, or something, I didn't care whether they was a jumper, all I cared is if they got in the water. That's what I was interested in. The same with fishing. "Let's go do what's doing and I don't care what your nationality is." [LAUGH] And so.... But, quite a bit, why we were separate. It just happened that way, I suppose.
I got real good friends with a kid down in the Bitterroot. Had a lot of fun with him... fooling around. I was the fire builder and we always had a contest. This was a furnace under the Ranger Station, we'd try to drive everybody out of there. We'd fill that thing so full of wood you couldn't imagine, and hope that the day was a ninety degree day. [LAUGHTER] We'd have that thing red hot. I know that room upstairs must have got up to 140. [Laughter]

SC Did you... was it... did you really like, like, going into those fires... jumping into those fires?

SS Yeah, I did. Oh, I liked smokejumping very well. The only thing was, that it was just seasonal work. And then I got on with the rail road and they were paying me more money to start with and it was year around. And I just got to looking at my hole card a little bit, and I always thought, "Well, I'll make another season if I get chance. I'll get a ninety day leave and maybe I'll come back." But I never did, so... but, I really loved the work. It wasn't anything bad about it at all, and being up in the mountains was all the fun in the world, you know.

SC But didn't... even working those fourteen hour shifts up there on the fire...?

SS Oh, that didn't mean anything, because I'd do that on the railroads. Didn't... I'd rather be up in the mountains.

SC Do you think that, other than these "outlaws" that you called them, like, from '47 to '49, the other two seasons... or, three seasons that you worked, what... what kind of man, do you think, made up smokejumpers? Do you think there was a common link between you guys?

SS Oh, there was college kids and other average kids. They sort of tried not to hire any more paratroopers and any more marines. They found out that paratroopers and marines were still fighting the war. And besides, they had this funny habit, they'd go to town and get drunk every night. And that was at odds with the program, you know. They wanted them to be pretty sober some of the time, you know. And one time, I remember, I think it was in '46, we had guy named Boyle, he was from Butte. He came in at 4:00 in the morning and Cooley had just roused the troops and had them ready to go on a fire. And here came Boyle, ready to go on the fire. He was dead drunk. Jimminy. "No. No. No. You can't go on the fire." And stuff like that, you know. And they had to discourage some of those guys from their activities. But they were just youthful men who were doing a natural thing. But it was a lot of fun. You'd go in the barracks and at any time you could find out that your outfit didn't win the war after all, the 187th won the war. And then you'd go down the line always further, you'd find that the 503rd won the war... er, I mean, go down a ways further and the Air Force had won that war. And these other outfits hadn't even been in it. And you'd find out that the 7th Marines had won the war
if you went in the next barracks. You wondered that that war must have been in stages, you know, and these guys were talking about different parts of it, or some thing. [LAUGHTER]

SC So, you said that, like, it was made up of college guys and just really a real mixture of people? You think the smokejumpers...?

SS Yeah. Afterwards they got rid of us military guys gradually, and slowly, and quickly. Then they started getting college guys mostly from the forestry schools. Oh, they had some other guys. They liked to get guys who'd been working on the Districts for a couple years, too. They had a lot of them. Gradually, it turned into a forestry outfit. That's what the Forest Service wanted was... they wanted a man who could fight that blisterrust when he wasn't working on the fire. [LAUGHTER]

SC Well, besides that, do you think that there was something... I mean, do you feel like all these guys that you've fought... that you've jumped on all these jumps, do you think that there was something about you... all of you? Something that you shared in common that you were interested in doing this kind of work? Do you think it takes a certain kind of person to be a smokejumper?

SS Ohhh... well, my life's a little different because I've always been a jumper, but I don't know.

SC No. Back then, before you started jumping.

SS I suppose just somebody who likes excitement, and it's a real good haven for that. Fell into it by, "Hey! This is exciting." After the war, everybody is looking for excitement. There wasn't any... like those same guys who were winning that war last week, why, "Hey! We haven't got anything to do this week, we'll try that smokejumpers!" Something like that, I think.

SC Oh... uh-huh... sure!

SS Smokejumping was... an active thing like that is, you'd consider it.

SC Do you think it was a challenge?

SS Ohh... well, I suppose so. I... I'm not a judge of that.

SC Well, do you think it was a challenge?

SS No. I just hoped I wouldn't get fired. I wanted to make that paycheck. [LAUGH]

SC Well, do you... I mean, do you feel like it was... that you really learned a skill?

SS Oh, yeah. Like on my first fire with Jack Dunne, I was
quite sure that I'd... did learned a skill. We went on a fire
down on Corn Creek on the Salmon. You could throw a rock off
this ridge and it'd go 6,000 feet down into the Salmon River. I
knew I'd learned a skill now. We jumped a two-man fire, me and
Jack. I... I learned how to let-down with my rope real good.
Out at Nine Mile I'd done it twenty times just perfect. I knew I
learned that skill real well, so I lit on an "old school marm"
that's a tree with a split in it. Well, I put my rope through
the belt and tied a knot. Turned the thing loose, and all of a
sudden, I was hanging upside down by my leg. I was upside down
and there wasn't nothing I could do. I was out there a thousand
miles from civilization and only John was gonna save my life. I
hoped that he was OK. [LAUGH] I hadn't seen him yet. "JOHN!
JOHN!" After awhile he come by. After he spent about a half
hour laughing at me, why, he let me down. But I would have
starved to death because I was about ten feet off the ground
upside down. [LAUGH] And I knew definitely that I'd learned a
skill right there. [LAUGHTER]

[END OF SIDE A]

[END OF SIDE B]

SS  Ask me some more questions.

SC  OK. You want me to ask you a question. You don't think of
anymore... can't think of anymore funny stories like that? Was
there any, like, legends about smokejumpers that you heard... by
the time you got in 1946?

SS  No. Surprisingly not. Or else I just went by that stuff.
I can't remember any of that stuff like that. In my old books
there I sort of wrote messages to myself.

SC  Did you? Old diaries? Do you have a diary of that time?

SS  Well, no. I've lost them. They're somewhere around the
house, but I can't find them. But I didn't... I looked at one
about twenty years ago but I didn't seem to think so much of the
old guys, or anything. They were just guys. They were just
doing something, and I come along seven years later and did the
same thing. That was all it meant to me, was that they... I was
jealous of them because they were free-fallers at first. But
then I took up free-falling there very soon. I wasn't always a
great dare-devil. I didn't even like jumping until my... it was
my twentieth jump, when I first started liking it.

SC  What did you feel like on your first one? Oh! You told me
about that. But you're telling me.

SS  Yeah. Oh, I was just sort of doing it. But didn't like it.

SC  Why do you... why do you think it took you twenty jumps?
What was it that...?
SS Maybe I was a coward. I don't know.

SC Oh! Did you... were you... did you feel fear when you...?

SS Oh, I think everybody does, really. Fear is different from panic.

SC Yes.

SS I didn't feel any panic. But suddenly on my twentieth jump, that was the start of 1948, "Why, hey! I like this! I want to get out of this plane! I really like this!" I wanted to get out. It's been like that ever since.

SC What about the pilots.

SS They were quite a bunch of old rascals. There's Slim Bowman, I think. And one we had, we named "Pinkie." And I don't even know their... his name. I know we called him Pinkie. He looped a Ford Trimotor full of jumpers, and they didn't know they was gonna loop. One day coming into Missoula... they'd gone to a fire and then they hadn't jumped, and the come back and he looped the field... looped the plane. They were quite surprised to find out that the old Ford would do a loop. It did. The amazing thing is: the old thing, you know, it only cruises about seventy miles an hour. Seventy miles an hour all the way around. There wasn't any great centrifugal force, but [LAUGH] they fell all over the place at the top because there wasn't any. [Laugh] And then I remember he flew up to Spotted... not Spotted Bear... yeah, I think it was. There was an airfield a few miles from Spotted Bear. It was either three miles or ten miles, I don't know which. But anyway, something had happened in the brace to the rear horizontal plane was gone... broke. He took a shovel and wired it on, that was plenty good enough; that would get him back to Missoula. Pretty good repair. And it did. [LAUGH]

SC Did the pilots stay with you, or were they just...?

SS No. They were all separate. They worked for Johnston... Johnson. We just... oh, they... when we were down at Hale Field, why, then we mingled quite a bit. But they were on duty, waiting for the fire buzzer or anything else. We just mingled as a bunch of people in the same area, more or less. There was mutual respect, you know. They'd say they wasn't crazy enough to jump out of a plane. We'd tell them "Well, we ain't crazy enough to fly one, either." Of course, we all wanted to sit up front in the Ford and sit behind the steering wheel, and they'd let us. Let you turn the airplane and stuff like that.

SC Oh, yeah!?

SS Yeah. Everybody got to do that. Usually the spotter or the squad leader, he'd hog up that job. But sometimes, you could slip in and beat him out of that position. That's pretty lucky.
SC Did you... did you get your turn up there in the cockpit?

SS Yeah, I got my turn finally. So I did do that.

SS What was it like? Did you really get to maneuver it?

SC Yeah. We got to turn the steering wheel. [LAUGH] Turn the airplane. Mainly because Pinkie was hung over and he wanted to rest a little while, so, "you drive it." I drove a Ford across the mountains. [LAUGH]

SC Oh, yeah?

SS But, I... I always claimed I flew a Ford Trimotor, but you're just sitting there.

SC Well, it sounds like fun, anyway.

SS Yeah. I'd a lot rather fly that one without that other guy there. That'd be real fun.

SC You haven't done that? With all your parachuting, you haven't...?

SS Not a Ford Trimotor. No.

SC But other planes?

SS Just little airplanes... just little ones. I became a great pilot under the GI Bill, but then that... when it ran out, I've never bought one penny of my own time. I found that, that was too rich for my blood.

SC OK. When... after you jump on these fires, and you went down and you finished them and you were out then, what was it like? Did you feel let down?

SS After the fire was out?

SC Yeah.

SS Oh, right then you was usually facing about anywhere from a ten mile, to a thirty mile walk, and quite often with a big pack. Now, usually you would try to arrange to leave all your stuff at the fire... anyplace and the packer would come in and get it with his mules. Sometimes you got to carry it yourself, about two out of... well, one out of ten times. Or, if there's a two man fire, why, you pretty near always... did something like that. But you'd start walking and, boy, you was tired from the fire and then you'd start walking and it turned into a lot of miles. It seemed like that twenty miles would suddenly be forty at the end. But you was glad to see the Ranger Station when you got there, anyway. So, that's pretty nice.

SC So, mostly you were just tired?
SS Yeah.

SC You were too tired to even feel anything else?

SS Well, I always had my little piece of leader and a couple flies in my pocket. And I always lagged behind, and if there's nobody around to be my boss, or if the boss was walking at the head of his troops, I always lagged behind quite a bit and tried to get a fish. But sometimes they'd get angry with me. "You're holding up the parade." Although we'd usually have to wait after we got whereever we was going, we'd always have to from anywhere from a half an hour to twenty hours, or something like that. But they seemed to feel that they were in control.

SC Did you ever want to be the boss?

SS No. I didn't have any... any feelings like that.

SC But they wouldn't... after you got down to the Ranger Station, I mean, would you just, like, sack-out?

SS Yeah.

SC Did you have free time then, or...?

SS They'd fix us a meal and we'd sack-out almost invariably. And then the next day we'd get in a pick-up, or whatever was handy, and we'd get to a town where they had a bus, or a truck or, Forest Service, or they'd fly us. It depends what they had... some kind of transportation back to Missoula.

SC Did you guys talk about the fire then?

SS Oh, yeah. We did lot of talking about... bragging about what I did, and "You were the bad guy." And how hungry we got, and how rotten the food was, and that kind of crap. Well, I found out one thing. On these fires... I can't remember which fire I was on, but anyway, I jumped in there and four days later, I had never peed yet. I had never urinated once. And yet I drank tremendous amounts of water. I drank about a pint every hour. I probably drank a little more than average, but I still had never gotten rid of any. And I figured out why. You're sweating... working so hard that you sweat it all out. And that was one of those twenty hours a day jobs, for about four days. And, by gosh, you... you don't have to do that if you got rid of it all by sweat. I asked other guys, and they... they'd had the same experience. They hadn't done it either.

SC So, what was your... what was worst experience you ever had jumping, or with a fire? Did you ever have one besides getting hooked in that tree?

SS That wasn't a bad experience, because John wasn't killed that trip. He came along and saved me right away. But it would
have been a bad experience if he'd been killed.

SC Well, what would have happened now? If something had happened to John, and he wouldn't have been able... did you have a radio on you?

SS Then it would have been a bad experience. [LAUGHTER]

SC No. I know. But, I mean, is there, like... would... is there... would they have come looking for you? I mean, do they, you know... I mean, eventually, would someone come?

SS Yeah. I think they would have. They would have come and found me the next day, but I don't know how you'd be hanging... [LAUGHTER] hanging upside down for about twenty four hours. I don't think you'd be in too good of shape. Maybe you would be. I don't know. You'd probably be mad enough to [laughs] kill somebody, like yourself.

SC OK. Well, since that wasn't your worst experience, did you have any really...?

SS I didn't have any bad experiences that I had... have any knowledge of, particularly. I was so sick one time that they just pushed me out. I don't remember doing that. I wouldn't have used the reserve, I know that, because I was too sick. I puked when I was coming down. I'd eaten a whole lot of pineapple cubes. And I can't figure that out, I always thought I chewed my food good and those days I had my teeth. I thought I chewed that stuff good and I drank a bunch of milk and pineapple just before this fire call. And we jumped, and I was just terribly sick. We jumped out of a Douglas and they just pushed me out. All of a sudden, I'm landing in a big bush. I never made any attempt to guide the chute, I just... just dead. And... but before I had hit the ground, I had barfed when I was about halfway down. And I was smothering or drowning in that stuff, because in this mask, none of this stuff would go out. It... the squares in the mask wasn't big enough to let the pineapple out. This pineapple and milk filled it plumb up, right to the eye level and it completely covered my nose and mouth. And I couldn't breath. And the first thing I did... you know, I'm working to get that, instead of guiding the chute, I'm trying to get these three straps off your helmet. "Ahhh! Got one of them off." And about that time I hit the ground. I'm still trying... I still hadn't had a breath of air for quite awhile, you know. It's been a long, long time... thirty seconds anyway. And all I'm doing is breathing this old puke. [LAUGH] Well, there's better things to breath.

SC I could see why you could call that your worst experience.

SS Yeah, it would be, I think... actually.

SC What did you do once you were on the ground after that? I mean, if you were so sick, did they still make you do much?
SS Oh, I recovered. Got out of my things slowly and went right to work, you know. Got out... got my face washed off and got my hands washed off. And I felt better about an hour later. But I went to work right away. You always went to work. No, I didn't get in on any of those big, scary jumps that people talked about. Some of them got bad injuries, you know, but I never dial anything like that.

SC Well, were you ever up there when you... you were heading for the fire and you felt that you couldn't really maneuver your... your...?

SS No. Never had any problems like that. We... I'd always aim for second-growth tree, about thirty... thirty five foot high and deliberately try to land in them. And that's harder on the chute, but it ain't harder on the body because your feet wouldn't even touch the ground and then you'd bounce back up. It's a very soft landing, and I successfully did that on about six fires, out of about... I think I was on fifteen fire jumps, and I managed to land on trees, six of them deliberately, and that was pretty nice. Some of them, the trees were too high to try that, you just didn't mess around.

SC What... how'd you get your chute out of the...?

SS Oh, you'd chop the tree down. Or you... whatever method you can. You're suppose to try to keep that chute without tearing it all up but most of us did whatever was necessary.

SC When you went on these, like, two-man jumps, did you... had you worked with these people well enough that you really could trust the man you were jumping with?

SS Oh, you always trusted them anyway.

SC Just because they were another....

SS As far as holding up their end of the work and stuff, you mean?

SC Just knowing there was another guy there that could help you get....

SS Oh, yeah. Yeah, you... you definitely was gonna do all you could to get that fire out and save each other if you was injured, or anything. There's no worry about that.

SC Was that part of being a smokejumper, that you knew that your buddy was gonna be there for you?

SS Yeah... yeah. You would never have any concern about it.

SC Did they make... oh, I'm sorry.

SS Go ahead.
SC Oh, no. I was just gonna ask you if you made friends with these guys. Do you still, I mean, like....

SS Make friends with?

SC With your... the guys... that you... in the summer, like, did you see them off season as well?

SS Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. Oh, yeah. Especially in the barracks there, why you'd get acquainted quite well with the guys who slept next to you and a little bit better with the ones close around. And then you'd got so you knew everyone in the barracks, but then your mixing with the other guys, and then we had softball games and stuff like that. That Jack Dunne, he... that I mentioned, he was a great softball player. He could throw a 300 foot softball, and he could curve it to the right twenty foot, or he could curve it to the left twenty foot. And he could tell you which way it was gonna go before he threw it. And I could never see how he did that. First place, I could only throw it 150 feet, and mine sent straight as the die. He was quite a....

SC Do you feel that you got to know these guys real well, after a season with them?

SS Oh, yeah. After awhile you did, yeah. Yeah. We had one clown team, Adams and [Neil T.] Shier, they... they were military guys. Shier was here this week. One day we were walking down the road and Adams picks up a rock about five inches across. Shier's walking on ahead about thirty feet. He pitched that old rock at Shire, "Hey Shire! Think fast!" Well, about the time he said that, why it smacked Shire on the head. Knocked him flat on the ground. Well, when he came to I says, "I've been telling you, Shire, you should think fast." [LAUGH] No mercy. No sympathy. Just, "I've been telling you, you ought to think fast." They were always doing something or other. I told Shire yesterday, "You was the comedy team. You guys didn't ever know you was the comedy team, you were too busy having fun." [LAUGH] Yep.

SS Oh, yeah... yeah. Amazingly large amount of them. Yeah, '46 was well represented. Yeah, it's a great turn out. Terrific. I wish there was a few more, but they're not here. Bill Hellman got killed in that Helena burn, he was one of my real good friends. I wish he was back, but I'm afraid he won't be. That created great pall on the... on the jumper camp. That took out about one third... or I mean, about one tenth of our jumpers all at one time. Things were pretty quiet around the jumpers for about a week. They's... sort of, starched us. We had never lost a jumper before that, and I don't think they've lost only about two of them since then. But... one bad thing happened, fire got away.
SC If you hadn't been discharged they day before, would you have been up there on that fire?

SS I wasn't discharged the day before. I'd gone to a fire on Myrtle Ridge. Yeah, I would have gone out on that thing if I'd been about two more down on the list. So I'm just glad I did get out. Yeah. We were in Sandpoint, Idaho when we heard about it. Sounded pretty bad. We did just... somebody heard on the radio about the fire, but we didn't know anything about it. Who they were, or what they were, and we were trying to think who the members were. Lee Gorsuch was with us, and he was afraid that Bob [Gorsuch] was on the fire, but he wasn't. See, that year several of us had gone to Reserve and National Guard things and we came on August 1, on Monday, to take our refresher training, just in time for the main part of the fire season. There were six of us who came back from the Reserve to take this training, and by Friday, three of them were dead. There was Joe Silva, and Silas Thompson, and Stan Reba, were all dead. Five days we... the other three of us got out just before that fire. So it's just a matter of fate. You know, this whole life is a matter of fate. We wasn't invited to that one, and here we are.

SC You think that... you said their whole life is a matter of fate, do you think that being a smokejumper, or parachutist, or free-faller is tempting fate at all?

SS Not particularly. You drive down the highway every day, you're within one foot, or two foot, or three foot, of another automobile. You're doing sixty, they're doing sixty, that's 120. That's all the... that you pull that towards the ground. And if that guy goes to sleep, or if you go to sleep, or if he has a blow out, you're steering goes haywire; you've just resulted in a fatal accident of which you are the main participant. And jumping ain't ever gonna be as dangerous as that. And when you go down the highway for 250 miles, you're meeting thousands of cars. So...

SC You don't think smokejumping is, either?

SS No. Oh, I mean... like I mean, it's fate. But it's not pushing your luck, or anything like that. You're in good hands.

SC You basically, you just... you just thought it was a fun job for the summer?

SS Yeah. It was. Yeah, it was just a fun job and it made good money, and then I bought my own rigs from Glen Smith in '48. He was a master rigger with the Forest Service in the smokejumpers. He talked me into my own rig. He talked to Dave Bert and Jack Nott and me into rigs in '48. And one guy ahead of us, he talked to Bill Bailey, he's from North Carolina. 503 man. He talked to him into one in '47. And he made about eleven jumps out here and we were quite impressed. We all decided we had to get one. So the next year we did, about the 4th of July we made all of our
first free-falls each... all of us did. But within a week, anyway. Well, then I had my own rig. Then when I got the railroad job and worked the year around, why... well, I figured, "Heck, I got a rig here in my kitchen and I can't go back to Missoula anymore for the summer. But it was the most fun I ever had, because out in the mountains all the time."

SC That was the... that was the biggest part of it? Not the jumping or... it was just being out there in the wilderness?

SS In my first two years, I didn't even like jumping. But I like the mountains. I like the animals and fish and stuff like that... walking around out there. But the jumping didn't appeal to me at all. Then, all of a sudden, I started liking the jumping. [LAUGH] So, it's been a lifetime hobby.

SC Was there anything else? Oh! I wanted to ask you about... because then you started working for the railroads, do you think that there was... is there anything different about the men that you worked with on the railroad and the men that you worked with smokejumping?

SS Yeah. The railroad men are the most greediest, selfish, back-stabbing bunch of... I can't say it on this... that have ever been around. And I said that the first week I worked there, and I still say it today. [LAUGH]

SC And how would you sum up the smokejumpers?

SS I'd love to be back with them. [LAUGH]

SC What... what is it about them? When you used all these words to tell me about the railroad men, what kind of words would you use to describe smokejumpers?

SS Well, a fun lot of guys and they just go out in the forest and do what's coming natural in an environment that you like to be in. And while there was a little backstabbing, I'm sure, why, I didn't notice it a heck of a lot. It wasn't predominant like it is on the railroad. They stab their best friend in the back every day if they can just to make an extra nickel. And I never saw that here. And you was good buddies, you'd... whatever you was doing, why you had a good time at it and enjoyed the work, enjoyed the play. It's sort of... well, there's no comparison between the two. [LAUGH] These people are more gentlemanly, we'll put it like that. Where, I mean, in my purview [sic] of things, they's the kind of people you'd like to be around. My railroad, I've been there for thirty five years and I don't even associate with more than one or two of them, because they... like I said. I just cut them off. I just walk off the job and I don't remember doing it, because they don't represent my ideals in life.

SC And you think smokejumpers do?
SS  Yeah. They like to do a lot more fishing, and hunting, and stuff in the woods. And have an interest in the same things I have. I can talk to a smokejumper and at least he knows what a parachute is. He won't ask the twenty usual questions. Anybody else, they answer... ask me twenty usual questions and after you run through all them, why go on to other things. But, anyway, I've got 920 jumps now, which is not very much, but my son has got 200 jumps in the last year!

SC  Wow! So, is you're son a smokejumper or just a...?

SS  No. He's just jumping. I had to get that in.

SC  No, that's fine. What is... what is... where you married at the time you were a smokejumper?

SS  No. Later on.

SC  What does your wife think about your jumping from airplanes?

SS  I don't think she liked it too well. I don't know.

SC  Same kind of worries that your Mom had?

SS  Oh, I don't know. But we left that girl down the line a ways.

SC  Oh.

SS  So [INAUDIBLE]

SC  But your son likes jumping?

SS  Yeah. He's gotten quite old, but then he's suddenly took it up when he was twenty seven, and he jumps up there at Kalispell. They go hog wild up there and so he can make a lot of jumps. He's doing it. He flies the jump plane when he isn't jumping, so he's found a home. [LAUGH]

SC  So, overall, you think that the smokejumping was a picnic in the woods.

SS  A picnic in the mountains, that's all I ever thought it was, and that's what it must still be. You go out there and just enjoy yourself and they pay you for it.

SC  And the hard work never bothered you when you were out on those fires?

SS  Well, maybe on one specific day I'd get wore out, you know. Naturally it'd be a [INAUDIBLE] But I didn't ever feel a bitterness or... I wouldn't want to stand around and bitching about it. I never did complain, like that, or anything. Like a lot of the guys did. I saw it as a lot of fun, I wanted to go again, but...
SC  Well, is there anything else that you'd like to say? This is an Oral History Project, and this is gonna go... be kept in the archives for anyone interested in smokejumping.

SS  Well, you know, I didn't get into much of that historical stuff, and I....

SC  You're part of it!

SS  [LAUGH] Well, now, let's see....

SC  Well....

SS  Glenn Smith, I was... he was an old parachute jumper. He started jumping in 1934 down in California and he started in this project, I think, in 1939 or '40. He went on and... he was there when I started jumping. And then he sold us our rigs for free-falling, and he made a fantastic profit, I'm sure. He was... he was sort of... had his hand out a little bit, but we were willing to fill him right up. But I think he did us a great service, because in Montana in '47 there was only eleven free-falls made, all by that Bob Bailey... or Bill Bailey. And in '48, there was probably twenty free-falls, at the most, made in Montana, and now there's 200 made in one day up at Kalispell. [LAUGH] And that was in a whole year. And there was no jumping Mondays. Well, he was a great pioneer, was promoting the sport--they didn't recognize it as a sport in those days, the few of us who were in it knew it was a sport because nobody would pay us to jump. So we knew it had to be a sport. [laughs] So, he did his share. But I don't know about the smokejumping history. I think we just about run out of stuff that I have to offer.

SC  I have one more question. You said you used to write things down. Did you use to just write about your day, I mean, is that what you would write down, or...?

SS  Yeah, sometimes I'd write down or my observations. I just had a notebook and sometimes I'd write a little bit down. Sometimes I didn't write anything for a year; and sometimes I'd write two or three days, you know, stuff like that.

SC  You don't... you don't know where it is, or anything?

SS  It's in that house, but I haven't seen it in over....

SC  Would you be willing to share it with the archives if you could find it?

SS  If I can find it, of course I will.

SC  I'm sure they'd love to see it.

SS  Oh, I'd give it to them.

SC  Yeah. I'm sure they'd love to see it.
SS  I... the only thing I can figure... possibly it isn't in that house, because when we moved last time, we only moved 100 yards, but... 150. But, possibly it was thrown out. But, it shouldn't have been. But I just just can't tell you on that.

SC  Well, if you do find it, I'm sure they'd really like to have it. If you're willing to give it, or maybe just photocopied if you wanted to keep it.

SS  Is this historical thing go through the Montana Historical Museum any... or is this strictly a college...?

SC  No. This is gonna be in the archa... archives here in the college.

SS  Oh, uh-huh.

SC  So it will be here downstairs. So if you ever find it, if take it to the archives down, you know, on the bottom floor of the library here.

SS  OK.

SC  That's where all this will be. We can stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW]