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RF This is Roxanne Farwell with the Smokejumper Oral History Project. I am interviewing Mr. William Wood and we are at Miller Hall, in the University of Montana. This is July 20, 1984 and it's about 11 a.m.. First off, I would like a little biographical data, and when were you born?

WW August 16, 1922.

RF And where were you born?

WW In Missoula, Montana.

RF What kind of work did you do prior to smokejumping?

WW Menial work, odd jobs and so forth. I was in college and uh... do you want to shut that off a minute? Just odd job practical work experience. I worked with my dad. We used to go out all summer. And we'd go out in the mountains and mine for gold. Then we worked on construction jobs and railroad. I worked on a railroad section gang and things... any job I could get in summertime. But I was a student up until I started smokejumping.

RF Were you studying anything in particular?

WW Wildlife technology at the University of Montana.

RF Yeah. I noticed on the questionnaire [that] you had worked for the Forest Service.

WW Uh huh.

RF As a firefighter?

WW Yes.

RF OK. So how many seasons of firefighting experience did you have before smokejumping?

WW One season. I worked as a... at camp Menard, Nine Mile camp, when the first year the smokejumpers were set up in Region 1, at Nine Mile. And I was on a organized fire crew. At that time called it a student fire camp. It would be comparable to what they could an inter-regional hotshot crew these days. We were a crew of forestry related students, forming firefighting teams to help take the place of the CCC program which was just going out at that time. And they needed organized firefighters and so I signed on with that group at camp Menard, that's the same camp that the jumpers were stationed at, in '41.

RF And so when did you start smokejumping?
In May of 1943.

RF OK. So you weren't in World War Two?

WW No. I was a 4-F candidate. I expected to go to the Army and I had taken a parachute rigging course, so that I could get in the airborne. I wanted to be in the paratroopers and I thought, "well that would help me to get into the airborne." Well, as it turned out, I was turned down as a 4-Fer. And so, since I had the parachute rigging experience, why then a friend of mine said something about, well there's a smokejumper outfit in here, which I had known about because I was in camp with them anyway. So, I asked for employment and they hired me. But I was hired because I had eye glasses and I had allergies, was the problem that the Army turned me down. But they decided to hire myself and another jumper named Al Cramer, Albert W. Cramer. He and I hired on together as an experiment. The Forest Service was concerned that all of the good men were gone to the service, you see, so they were concerned whether they could have fellows jump with glasses and get by. And since we both were experienced firefighters, they hired us, and we went to work for them. And that's how we got on. How I got on.

RF Were the eye glasses any problem?

WW Not a bit of problem. No. I made the first couple of jumps without them and then jumped the rest of the time with them.

RF Were your allergies any problem at all?

WW No. No more than usual hay fever. I never could really figure why the Army turned me down because I thought, "I almost [my] ailments were far less bothersome than some of the guys they accepted from my peer group, you know. (Yeah). But that's not here nor there.

RF When was the last year you smokejumped?

WW Well, see, I stayed with the Forest Service. I retired from the Forest Service. And I... I stayed... I jumped, the last year I jumped was 1960. I started in '43 and the last jump I made was in 1960. And then I got transferred to the Washington Office and that put the end of that, I got moved into more office work, you know. And no opportunity, of course, to jump in a Washington Office.

RF Yeah. Seventeen years of smokejumping is...

WW Well, it's a long haul, but it went fast. Time went awfully fast.

RF How many jumps was that?

WW Oh, I didn't make very many jumps. I never really kept track of them. And I guess probably I could figure I made
somewhere around 80 jumps, somewhere in there, you know. Which is really a small number of jumps by today's standards. Because the fellows that are jumping now had... well the programs has expanded so much, I know some of them have several hundred jumps. You know, which is amazing. But another thing that kind of limited our ability early... guys in the early stage of the game. We were the spotters, the jump masters, so to speak and so we didn't get to jump so much because we had these new coming recruits we had to... the CPS program and we had to train and drop those guys and so it made it less opportunity for us to jump. We could only jump on the larger fires where there were 8 to 16 men or more. You see. (yeah). And most of the fires are small fires and so we did the spotting, we called it, and the cargo dropping. And just jumped the crew fires.

RF I suppose you'd want to jump every once in a while anyhow just to keep in practice.

WW Oh yeah, we got practice jumps. Yeah, you bet. That's a... that's a thing that we had lots of practice jumps. And I know when we try to tally up the number of jumps we had, trying to count back from experience or recollection, why I can remember lots of practice jumps that I had that were never entered into our regular records, you know, how many, who had how many jumps, you know.

RF Yeah. Well, what attracted you to jumping out of planes?

WW Well, I guess I wanted to do something... I had a little wounded ego because the Army wouldn't accept me, you know. And I wanted to do something that was somewhat patriotic or challenging or something. I guess that's really what I... I probably needed a egotistical thing, but I wanted to do something to maybe demonstrate to myself I could do something. I don't know really... other than that it must be part of my motivation. Of course I needed a job too, you know.

RF Yeah. Yeah, but you wanted to be a paratrooper in the Army. And any particular reason why you were attracted to that other than anything else?

WW No. It just seemed like the way to go, get there... you know... just seemed a little more appealing, a little more challenging, I guess you'd say. That's the only reason I can think of at this time.

RF Where did you get your rigging training?

WW In Missoula. A fellow named Frank Gary, who you've heard of, established a parachute rigger training course, in Missoula, downtown, in a building. I can't remember which building. It was down on Front Street somewhere though and he established this training program and I had nothing to do, I was just waiting to go to the service, you know. So, I took the parachute rigging program while I had time. And took it and passed it and got an
FAA parachute rigger certificate from that course.

RF What was involved in that course?

WW Well, just really packing parachutes and patching them, repairing them, pretty brief course in that because normally civilian parachute riggers don't have much damage to parachute canopies, you know. So, it was pretty minor that way. But it was mostly... you had to be able to pack several types of... backpacks, seatpacks, chestpacks, the various styles and types of parachutes you had to be able to pack those. And then demonstrate in front of a CAA inspector that you could do so. He would come in and they have a final examination, you know, practical examination where you would pack parachutes for the FA... well it was the CAA, in those days, Civil Aeronautics Authority. Inspect them and pack them for him and get your a ticket if you did everything OK. And then there was also a written test, which really didn't amount to much, you know.

RF When you decided to become a smokejumper or when you were thinking of paratrooping, did your family have any reaction to that?

WW Well, my mother wasn't happy about it, but she was also very understanding and I'm not sure what my father's reactions were to it, I... he's still living, I should ask him what he thought about it, never occurred to me. I know my mother was somewhat concerned, but then I told her it was a job, you know. And it wasn't as hairy as it sounded. And so, they went along with it. I was under... I think I was 18 years old at that time.

RF In '43?

WW Yeah. So, I was under age on that score, wait a minute. No, maybe I wasn't either. I guess I did have to have their written permission though to get into the program. Whatever. But there was no problem there.

RF Did you have any contact with parachutists before or smokejumping before you got into the program?

WW Well, yes, you see. I knew these, quite a few of the jumpers at Nine Mile, the first year they had a crew in 1941. I was in a student fire camp which was in the same base as the smokejumper camp. And there was about a dozen of those fellows up there at that time. And I knew those fellows Earl Cooley and Jim Wade and some of those fellows.

RF How did they impress you?

WW Oh, I knew some of them from neighborhood acquaintances and they... I didn't have any great profound admiration for them. They were just guys like the rest of us, but were lucky enough to get into the jumper program. They were a little older because you had to have some fire experience to get into the program.
But I thought they were a fun loving bunch. They were always playing tricks on somebody. I remember one case that, had one fellow that was always gung ho for everything... so one of the fellows took a couple of spikes and... he was the type... very methodical type would get out of bed and have his shoes right in place and he'd put his feet down there and lace his boots and get up and go. Well, they nailed his shoes to the floor, and the guy put both shoes on without ever moving his feet, and he got up to move and of course he couldn't. (laughing). Well, those sort of things kind of intrigued me. I mean they were always doing some practical thing, putting smoke bombs on a salesman's car or something like that. I recall one instance, they had a salesman come by peddling some product anyway, and while he was in the office talking, why the jumpers sneaked outside and put some sort of a whiz bomb on the spark plug, on the ignition of his car and of course when he started the car it... it was a simulated explosion with smoke pouring out all over and I got in on that and that was a funny thing... but that was my exposure to the... my first exposure to a parachuting of any way, shape or form. So, I guess that's about all I can say on that score. And that gave me a first recollection of ever being around parachutes and people that did it. And then after I took the parachute course from Frank Gary, of course, he and I became fast friends, and we hunted and fished together and worked together. So, that's about the size of that I guess.

RF So, you're basic training was in May '43?

WW Yeah. I've got some diaries here, I could look it up exactly, but I'm sure May is close enough. It was early in May. We started early in May at Seeley Lake, Montana. And that was the first jumper base that I recall anyway, from the time I started. Now, they trained at Nine Mile earlier and then later went back to Nine Mile. But we had our own camp at Seeley Lake.

RF Do you remember any of the people you trained with?

WW Oh, yeah. Sure, well Al Cramer was one of them and Frank Younger... Bob Derry was one of them. There were a number of conscientious objectors I... the names escape me at this point, most of them, but there were a couple of fellows from Idaho, Lloyd Johnson from McCall, Idaho, and a fellow named Fergie Ferguson from McCall, Idaho. Just quite a few of the CPS fellows that... they expanded later into so many fellows that the names are a little cloudy, names and dates, I not sure they were there at that first time. But there was about 50 or 60 of them there I think of the COs, as we called them.

RF Do you remember Phil Stanley or...

WW Oh, yeah. Very well. I just can't remember though whether he was at Seeley Lake that first year or not

RF He was.
WW  He probably was. Yeah, I know Phil quite well.

RF  And Dave Flacus?

WW  Dave Flacus. Yeah. Right. See, I knew those fellows were in the program but I couldn't remember just when they entered it and what base they were at.

RF  Yeah. I just interviewed them today.

WW  Oh.

RF  They told me when they were... they said they were there May '43.

WW  Yeah. Well that's right. That's the same bunch. The difference being, of course, I was employed by the Forest Service and they were under the CPS program. And I think that's one reason probably why they were a little bit anxious to have Al Cramer and myself on board is because we had fire experience and could at least lead those guys in training and help in some of the supervision jobs on the firefighting and that sort of thing. Because the CPS boys came just green as grass, most of them from the Midwest the Mennonite areas and places like that where there was no fire to worry about.

RF  Did all the Forest Service personnel that were trained then, were they all spotters then?

WW  Well, as I can remember no they weren't, Bob Derry never spotted and there was another fellow there, a Forest Service employee, a fellow named Bob Migs, as far as I know he never spotted. He was Forest Service. But Al and I took... were spotter... trained for spotters right off the bat, right in the early stages of the game, even before we had our seven qualifying jumps, they were using us for spotters. But I recall that Lloyd Johnson, I think, and Ferguson, then there was another fellow named Jack Heintzelman who was a Forest Service man from Region 6 from Cave Junction, Oregon, I believe, or somewhere anyway. He took spotter training, but that was later in the summer. And I recall he went on, stayed with the Forest Service, became chief of personnel and he was a very... top notch forester in his own right. But he jumped just for a couple of years. But he started at Seeley Lake, I remember. And he'd got the spotter training because he had to go back to Region 6 and establish a smokejumper crew there and set up his own base. The same thing with Lloyd Johnson and Fergie Ferguson. They were kind of sent there to get the training so they could go home and establish their own bases.

RF  Was spotting a very stressful sort of a job?

WW  Well, it was one that I took that I was very sincere about it and I didn't take it lightly. I figured it as a precision type job. And Al too, maybe because we were under the gun
because of our eyesight or something. But we were quite precise.
I mean we'd throw the drift chutes, in those days they were
chutes, not streamers, we'd throw them and we'd be darn sure that
the guys could get into the spot before we'd dump them out. And
I kind of detected over the years, as time went by, that some of
the fellows were a little more careless than we were, in the
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"Maybe Jack, the thing to do is to hold into the wind on that thing and it won't take you so far over that lake. I will just take you about halfway on the lake." "OK. That's fine." When I let him out, in the meantime the wind had stopped dead, just dead calm, and there he was over the middle of the lake, and he had to turn around in that chute, we had eagles in those days, they were a very grotesque looking parachute compared to what they are using today. But he turned that thing around and pulled for all he could do and just made the water line on the downwind side of the lake. In other words, in those suits in those days there was no flotation in them. It would have been really a bad situation, you see. But I talked to him later, he wasn't at all concerned or scared but it was everything he could do to get back from the middle of that lake... to get back on that shore. So, from that time on, I never took a man over water to drop him. I dropped him across streams and things like that but never drop a man where there was a chance he could get in the water. If I couldn't drop him safely, I wouldn't drop him. Because all we would've needed was a drowning or something like that and then we'd have been under the gun to keep the program going. I have so many memories that I could fill a book with them, things like that. But that's one that stands out, you know as far as spotting goes.

RF What was training like back in '43?

WW Compared to today's training it was very rudimentary. As a matter of fact, I was about half uh... I was athletic myself, so I knew how to tumble and jump and that sort of thing. And those of us in the training program before long, we were innovating, adding to it. I mean it wasn't a scheduled thing with a written program and all that sort of thing. We went out and we jumped off of fence rails and we had some ramps built and climbing ropes and some of those very rudimentary obstacle course things and we'd get up on top of the ramp and jump off. The fellow that could do it best got to be the instructor. I mean that's about the way it is. See, we didn't have a formulized procedural thing like a parachute landing fall that they have today. It was just the guy that could make it to the ground without getting bumped and bruised as hard looked pretty good, so they put him in charge of the program, of that particular phase of training. And it was done primarily though by the fellows that has jumped the year before. I forgot to mention another civilian, Art Cochran and there's Jim Waite also. I can't remember, Cooley was never at Seeley Lake, but anyway, I don't know where he was in those days. But those fellows that jumped the year before, so they knew the letdown techniques and that sort of thing. But for the most part it was kind of a thing that we built as we went along, kind of like that in my recollection anyway. We had a big rope we'd get up on a high fence and swing off and drop off the rope and try to simulate a parachute landing. But it wasn't as formalized as it is today. And I think our injury rate probably, our training injury rate, I think we probably sustained more injuries in training in those early days than they do today, because we just didn't know how to do it to well.
RF Did you feel ready for the first jump?

WW Oh, I think so. Yeah, I'd say we did. We had enough rigorous exercise that by the time you finished that training and physical requirements and so forth, and we were in pretty good shape to start with you know. But just the same, by the time you sweat it out, making those letdowns, and climbing ropes and doing all that, you're ready to go after, I think there's a week we trained, I'm not sure. It wasn't a long training period, but it was a short and tough one. But, yeah, I think we were ready, although I recall sitting in that door asking myself what I was doing there. I remember asking... telling myself there must be other ways to earn a living. I had certain reservations about it. See, I'd packed a lot of parachutes, but I had never jumped one. So, I had some reservations about it. But really I think the motivation was to prove to myself I had guts enough to do it. That was really the only person I had to prove it to was myself. Of course after you make that first jump you're hooked. It's so exhilarating and you just want to get right back up and do it again right away. So, the first jump before you went out the door was a little worrisome or your concerned, but you had to do it. I mean, there was no way you could back out once you were down in that door. Later jumps were tougher sometimes than the first jump. I think one of your questionnaires said something about what was your toughest jump. I think it was my 16th jump. Somewhere in that range anyway. We were jumping out of another base, and it was just a practice jump and we had a fellow go out a couple of jumps ahead of me that had a streamer, the parachute didn't open. Well that kind of got to me. I thought well that's bad news, of course I had to go out and jump anyway. But it wasn't the first jump that was the toughest really. It was after you had experienced... had the experience and could really evaluate the whole process. Then you could ask yourself some more sensible questions. You had to do it the first time to prove you could, but from then on you didn't have to prove anything, you just wondered why you were doing it. I'm doing all the talking, I better let you get back to the questions.

RF Oh, well your supposed to be doing the talking. So, basic training now is just... is it longer and more rigorous and is it more structured or...?

WW It is... it is in the first year that I was involved and the first few years I was involved in the program, but of course, as we went along we got more refined and more sophisticated see, we elaborated. Then as the fellows came out of the military there were innovations or adaptations of the military techniques that we kind of built into the program. And we made it more stringent I think in as far as physical requirements. And it was just more... we had lesson plans, sort of brief lesson plans on how to do this and do that. But we didn't even have a piece of paper on the training course when I started in '43. I don't recall that we graded... we didn't have any grading system or anything like that. We just... if a guy signed on for jumping or came to us to be jumping why we'd try to make a jumper out of
him. It was just that simple. We didn't worry too much about
the things that they make a lot of... put in quite great import-
ance these days, I think.

RF Can you recall the Forest Service attitude towards the COs
before they came? When they decided they were going to take on
some COs, did they feel ambivalent or anything?

WW Well, do you mean my colleagues or the run of the mill
Forest...

RF I guess your colleagues is what I'm thinking...

WW I think, well, maybe it goes both ways. I sensed more
animosity towards the COs from District personnel and people who
didn't have the opportunity to work with them. The rednecks that
you find in any organization, out on the Districts or whatever.
They all had a... those that were inclined that way had a...
quite a animosity towards them, I guess you might say and under-
standably so. They had lots of relatives in the service and so
forth. But in the jumper outfit, I guess some of us had our
reservations about them at the onset. We didn't know who they
were or what they were like or anything. But after we worked
with them and saw their dedication, see they were working for
$2.00 a month, I think they got to buy shoes with or something.
Well $2.00 a month would buy a pair of shoes after you had jumped
about a year. It's like any other outfit, some of them are real
top notch men, really good men, and for the most part, better
educated than the run of the mill Forest Service field employee.
But there were some that were slackers. You kind of had the
idea they were slackers anyway. They didn't put the energy
into the program that some of the others did. But they contri-
buted a great deal to the program as far as I'm concerned. Not
so much in the training... innovations in training and so forth,
but in just things... other skills that they possessed. Like,
Stanley was an excellent photographer, of course, you know,
professional. And he did a lot of work for the Forest Service in
photography and things of that nature. But as far as the animos-
ity between the conscientious objectors and the guys that trained
them, I developed more... I'm trying to think of a word but a...
appreciation, I guess, for them, after I had worked with them a
few years than I did at the onset because I just didn't know
what we were up against at the onset. They would stick together.
There were some cases where a fellow looked like he
shouldn't be jumping, he was just stiff legged or inept, very
poorly coordinated, something, we'd want to hold him back out of
the jumper program because we were sure he'd get hurt eventually,
and many times our judgement was right on those cases and the
COs would have sort of a little committee, they'd come and buck
us on it. They'd form a committee and come and tell us why we
shouldn't wipe this guy out. Well, it was our decision to make
whether we thought on the basis he might be injured later be a
problem and we easily prevailed on that case. But no one ever
left that camp and failed to make it without them letting us know
that they didn't approve that. One way or another they wanted to
carry the guy. But you can't carry a guy on parachuting... he's got to pull his own weight. He's got to cut the mustard or that's all there is to it. But I have lots of them that I regard as friends. I haven't maintained the contact with them that I should have through the years. I guess I let things go. But I have a lot of high regard for some of the fellows that I worked with on that program. So, I guess that's about the size of that.

RF Did it surprise you how dedicated they were when they were only making the $2.00 a month?

WW Well, there was another thing to see, it was either this or go to some other camp. And so you always had that thing in the back of your mind. Well if a guy wasn't here he'd be pitching hay someplace else or sweeping streets or working in a hospital, a bedpan man, or a mental institution or something. They took on all kinds of jobs that were needed jobs, but non-combatant sort of jobs. So, you always felt that the fellow was... well, he had an out in other words, but he chose this one because it was more challenging and somewhat for the same reason that I went into it myself. I wanted to do something patriotic and those guys wanted to do something in that same vein, a more challenging job and to prove they weren't yellow. So, I have a lot of regard for the program. And as firefighters they were topnotch. There were a few laggards, but most of them were just darned good firefighters and they went the extra mile on almost everything that they got into, as far as I'm concerned. So, I can't bad mouth them at all.

RF Did you notice any difference in the relationship between jumpers in the Forest Service after the war when you had the returning vets coming in?

WW Well, yeah. I could talk a long time on that. I don't intend to, but there was a lot of jumpers that had the idea and were a little bit uppity and they would refer to the Forest Service guys as ground pounders. They started nicknaming the guys who had to walk to the fires as ground pounders. That didn't go over good. And then a lot of our jumpers were pretty rough shod customers. A lot of them were out of the airborne units in them military, you're talking after the war. They were guys that served in a lot of rough situations and duties and they had very little regard for government property or other things. So, there was some animosity, and I believe even to this day there is some animosity between jumpers and some Forest Service units, the ground people. It's not as rampant as it was in the early days. It was a real concern in the early days. But I think it's lessened to a great extent almost hopefully disappeared today. But it was on both sides. They thought the jumpers were overpaid and another thing that was bad, the jumpers would go in, hit a fire and get a line around it and leave. Then the poor guys had to mop it up, see. This made the jumpers appear a little more arrogant and hotshotty. So, there was some of that all right. Even the first year I had a squad in Big
Prairie, I had to do a lot of missionary work with a ranger. He was dead set against jumpers. He had no use for us at all. And I had a crew of CPS men in there in Big Prairie and we built fences for them and telephone lines and did project work for them and did good work. Our telephone line is the straightest line in that whole district. And we built lots of fence and stuff and... worked like hell, and by the time summer was over why that ranger he was our bosom pal. But it took missionary work. He used to call me in at night and we'd visit. He'd say "why should you guys be out here, we can fight our own fires and so forth." He resented us at the onset. It was very obvious. Just from his open and direct remarks. He could have very well done without us, as far as he was concerned. But... and they didn't want to use us. There were some occasions when they got a fire that we should have jumped on and they sent a lookout... a green lookout kid across country to find the fire and he got lost, this one case I'm thinking of, the kid got lost, couldn't find the fire and he hunkered down the rocks and they didn't here from him so they sent the packer up to get him and the packer got up there in the middle of the night and he started yelling for the kid and the kid thought it was a mountain lion screaming and so he wouldn't answer him (laughing) the packer spent a day or two trying to find this poor, frightened lookout kid, who had never been on a fire in his life. But it was a fire that didn't get away. So, you could say the ranger was maybe right in that instance. But it was a fire that we could have jumped on very... just a perfect jumper fire. But he didn't want to use us, see. And his own Forest Supervisor, out of Kalispell at that time, he wasn't really sold on the program either. They wouldn't use us if they could possibly avoid it. So, that's kind of the way it started out. But over the years it has changed considerably.

RF There's plenty of fires where the smokejumpers do the mop up though, isn't there?

WW Oh, yeah. Now a days particularly. The more... yes. Now that was the earlier days, you see and they had the wrong concept. Manpower was short, scarce and jumpers are supposed to be a hard hitting initial attack force. And so that didn't set too well with some people. But nowadays jumpers will jump on a fire... and even in the earlier days I jumped on fires and we mopped those fires up just colder than a turkey, you know. That was the thing to do. But on the crew fires, why it seemed like the jumpers got in, get a line around it or do something and get relieved and the ground pounders would have to sit there and watch them march off to another happy jump. (laughing).

RF Did you have any contact with the 555th?

WW I met some of their officers and some of their men but I didn't train with them. They took Frank Garing, a fellow named Jack Allen, went over to Pendleton, Oregon and trained those guys. And the only contact I had with them was some... a couple of black doctors. This'll be a bigot story for you. We had an injured CPS man on a fire on the Bitterroot and we needed help
for him, he was badly injured, a break and a compound fracture of the upper leg. So, we arranged to get, I say we, the office people, arranged to get these two black doctors from the 555th to come over and jump on him and help him out. Which they did. They came over and jumped. One funny thing about it was they always take their helmets off after they jump, they weren't afraid of hurting their heads. Now that sounds kind of funny, but these guys would take their helmet down and just throw them away. I don't know why, but they figured they...

RF While they were under canopy, you mean?

WW Yeah, while they were descending. The first thing they do, is take the, not all of them, just this instant I'm telling you about. These two guys took their helmets off and just threw them away as soon as the chute opened up. Well they jumped and helped set the guys leg and fixed him up and everything and then helped pack him out of the hills. And that night, they got in late at night, tired and dirty and my boss at that time, Vic Car, was a forester took them downtown to the Florence Hotel to see if he could get them a room, no rooms available. So, he took them to the Palace, no rooms available. Took them to the Missoula Hotel, no rooms available, and he says, "well that's enough of this nonsense." He wasn't going to have them stay in a flop house so he took them home and put them up at home. But see, that shows you the attitude towards black people. Now even though these guys had jumped and helped pack out a white man and done all these noble things, then when they come to get a nice rest before returning home, our system wasn't set up to accommodate them. It wasn't the Forest Service's fault it was just the general public apathy, I guess that's the word, in that day in age. That's a long time ago, you would never find that happening today. But these fellows had done their very best to help this fellow out and then couldn't be put up in a public accommodation. But that always stuck in my craw, is what I'm saying. It always stuck in my craw.

RF Did the other fire crews work well with the 555th though?

WW Not too well in my recollection. I was never on a fire with them. I dropped lots of men on fires they were on. And of course I talked to our foreman and spotters when they came back. But generally speaking, they were not too aggressive on fires, and they were a little bit spooked by the whole thing. But they learned if you integrated the crew. If you took, say a squad of 555th guys and put a squad of jumpers in with them, mixed them all up and put them in together on a line building function, they worked damn well. But when they got together and, now this is hearsay, it's not personnel experience, but it's hearsay from men I... reliable men. If they got together they seemed like they lacked direction and a little bit spooked by the whole process and they didn't work as aggressively and sometimes they just dogged it. They just really did sit on their dime and not worry about it. But when they were integrated and mixed in with jumper crews, by gosh they worked well. I never worked with a
crew of them, but I found that experience somewhat with Indian crews too.

RF No racial flareups though on the line...

WW No. That's one thing about fire fighting, you got a common enemy there that can just take all the energy you've got. Unless you're really...you've got some real hangups.

RF I guess you were working with smokejumpers when they were mostly college students too then?

WW Well, I don't think mostly. I worked... well, of course I was here in Missoula for 17 years. So, I went through 17 years of transformation into... I think more college students in later years than in earlier years. A lot of guys were on GI bill and... but I think they're about 50-50 when... right shortly after the war. The balance was about 50-50 and then I think it gradually swung more heavily in favor of forestry people.

RF What was the attitudes towards project work throughout the years?

WW Well, it was a mixed thing. If the project was a good one, and a worthy one, the guys worked OK on it. But when it was piling brush or something that was way below their expectations, it got monotonous as heck and the guys didn't like it. They belly-ached and of course there were project work... there wasn't enough project work in Missoula to take care of the bunch. So, we shipped them all over the forests and they'd be far away and they'd hear about the fires and guys going to the fires and they thought they should be on the jump list. So, there was a lot of disgruntled guys that didn't like project work. They just felt they should be sitting around waiting for a fire call. But in those days, well even today, Forest Service money was too tight to allow that. They had to have those guys in meaningful work and it was good for them. The trouble was finding work that was physically demanding. It was a challenge to keep them in shape and that sort of thing. And even to offset that why we would send sometimes we'd have training units we'd go out and have them refresh their letdown training. Certain critical phases of training we'd have them or bring them in periodically rotate them and bring them in and kind of retread them and send them back out. This is in easy fire years now. On a bad fire year, hell they would crawl under the tables when the fire bell would ring because they were so tired from fighting fires. It just depended on the severity of the fire season. The project generally was mixed. If it was a good project... well, like our projects in at Big Prairie, we helped build a bridge there and we built telephone line and fenced the airports and built the airports up and that sort of thing and did constructive work and we didn't have any trouble. Now that was CPS crews too. They were a little more... CPS crews accepted that thing with more philosophical attitude than the guys that got right out of the service and even, and later even. So, it was really the project work and how
skillfully it was handled or administered, rotated. So, the guys could get rotated and come back in and get a jump and go back out and work, in an easy year. But bad years, there wasn't any problem with project work because everybody's busy fighting fire.

RF You mentioned in your questionnaire that in the centralized Region 1 the project work didn't work as well. Is this what you're talking about? Sending people out far away and they miss the jumps.

WW See, Region 1 had a centralized project administered out of the regional office. In Region 6 you have 3 or 4 forests that administered the jumper projects like the Deschutes, the Okanogan and the Siskiyu. They have their own project. Those fellows report right to the Forest Supervisor. And that was a better deal, I think, as far as this morale thing you're talking about. I'm not saying it's the most efficient all the way around, but they felt a part of the forest, they were a part of the forest. A guy was from the Okanogan forest when he was a jumper. He fought out of that base and they were more responsive to that sort of close central administration than they are long distance work. I'm sitting over in Big Prairie with a crew of jumpers and headquarters are back here in Missoula and we're almost out of touch. We see an airplane flying over and it's going to one of our fires. Things like that. Long range administration is harder to do. But it may be more efficient in other aspects of the total program. But I always felt that Region 6 jumpers were far more dedicated than the Region 1 fellows, to the Forest Service because you felt more a part of it. Whereas I... some of the fellows, I almost had the impression that they didn't even know the Forest Service administered the program. I mean, some of the jumpers that just came in and they seemed to have very little allegiance, but we broke that down, I think later when we got a fire chief named Ernie Desilvia came in here in later years and I was out of the jumping end of it and in the Missoula equipment development center. But Ernie really reached out to try to make more contact with the jumpers and make them a part of the family. And I think it helped a lot. It just gradually... I think now it's a different game, I'm not sure though because I've been away from it for so long.

RF I'd better turn over my tape.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

RF Well, OK we'll get into the fire season now. You remember your first fire jump?

WW Yeah. It was on Cathedral Peak on the South Fork of the Flathead, out of Spotted Bear Ranger Station. And we jumped it out of Big Prairie. And 4 of us jumped on it. And it was just a little easy fire. And it was one that the packer came right to and packed our gear out for us which was a... we didn't even have
to pack our gear down to the trail. He came right to the fire with a pack string and loaded it up and it was a cinch fire. It was really good. Although I recall I hung in a tree of... which was a pretty high tree and I had quite a time getting my chute out. But, yeah I remember that fire real well. Nothing outstanding about it. It was just a nice perfect jumper fire. The kind you like to jump on. Put them out and get out.

RF Did getting hung up in a tree cause you any problems with a letdown or anything?

WW No. No. We were well trained in letdown. Letdown in those days was more difficult, of course, than it is today because we had this far more complicated procedure. We didn't have the sophisticated hardware, the release hardware you have today. So, it was harder out of the chute. But it was no problem because [we were] well trained. But the problem was to take a set of tree climbers and go back up about 90 feet up into the tree and get the parachute out. And I couldn't get it out because I had capped it perfectly, it was right over the top of it. So, what I did was get up and gather all of the chute I could up and tie it to the back side of the tree and then went down and fell the tree. So, I fell it into an easy spot and didn't stretch a thread in the whole parachute. But, yeah I remember that fire real well. So, I don't know what you can say about one little fire.

RF You had to bring those chutes back or...

WW Yeah, that was the toughest part of the smokejumping job was... particularly in those days our gear wasn't nylon and insulite materials. It was felt and heavy duty canvas, heavy stuff. Our hardware was heavy, our webbing was heavy and all of that. So, our equipment weighed, I think probably 20% more at least, than the equipment weighs today. Maybe more than that for all I know. We had a bigger... some of the chutes were bigger too. They were Eagle parachutes, which were sometimes 30 feet in diameter and they had a lot more silk in them, they were heavier than the chutes they're using today, I think. But that was the toughest part of it, packing the gear out. Really, in my estimation, it was. And it was particularly tough in Region 1 because we had the most back country with the longest way in and way out. And it was not unusual for somebody to carry his gear 15 or 20 miles. In fact, I think one fellow carried it 30 miles.

RF That was before you could get to a packer.

WW Yeah. Before a packer could get at it. And so, due to trails being closed and things like that. It doesn't happen that way anymore. They have choppers that come in and help them out.

RF What was the most difficult fire you were on?

WW You mean from a physical standpoint of exhausting and that
sort of thing?

RF Exhausting or maybe the most difficult to get under control or figure out how to fight or anything?

WW I never have thought of that. That's a... I guess off hand I... as far as control of fire, I can't think of any that were really too tough. We were on some that chased us around for a few days and then we chased it, the fire, but it was all hard work. You just threw dirt and sweat and worked like the devil on it. I can't think of any that were really physically any more demanding probably than the run of the mill.

RF Any exasperating...

WW I never had any tough situations. See, I didn't have any that were the critical thing, that I can think of. We had some fires that burned down hill at night, run you out of your sleeping bed or something like that. But I can't even think of the name of the one I have in mind. It was over on the Clearwater. But uh... I can't really think of a tough fire, any that stands out. I guess I will just have to pass on that one.

RF OK. Were there any fires that were kind of exasperating because of the way they were handled or anything?

WW Now you really hit my spot. When I was a... it was in the 50's. I've got that date, I have a memorandum on it here. I was sent with a bunch of jumpers to Cave Junction, Oregon, to jump on fires that were occurring in California. Across the Siskiyu Range on the California side on the climate side. And I think I wrote quite a bit in the questionnaire about this one, but any rate it was really a frustrating fire. And it was one that had some long range impact. These fellows in California were inexperienced in using jumpers and they were ordering jumpers, I think there was 50 some Region 1 jumpers down there and I was in charge of them, and there was a smattering of jumpers from Region 6 there, from Region 6 bases. And the California fellows would order jumpers a few at a time to do Herculean tasks that they couldn't do, like jump on the top of the fire. Their orders were... you could tell the way the orders were coming in that they really weren't handling the jumpers, using jumpers the way that they really can be most effective. So, after sending men back and forth to this fire, incidentally one fellow jumped on the fire three times, the same fire, I can't remember his name but somebody here at this reunion will certainly tell me his name. But he jumped on the fire and was released as soon as he got on the fire and sent back to Cave Junction and the next day jumped on the same fire again. Well anyway, that one... he jumped three times. And they dropped our jumpers on the fire and most... the incident that really concerned me the most, of course, was that I had some good overhead on that fire, squad leaders who I could rely on, who were experienced firemen and knew the game.

On one, two occasions they dropped these guys above the fire
and the people on the ground would backfire and burn... and run them out, see. They were working from the top down, the ground crew was working from the bottom up and backfiring as they went. And their backfires would run up the hill and chase the jumpers off the mountain and burn up all their gear. Well, after we lost I don't know how many outfits, about 15 or 20 outfits parachutes, jumpsuits, and the whole smear, I knew there... I said we got to do something about this. And the top shot, the guys came back in and told me, "that fire's hairy, somebody's going to get killed on that fire." And so, the next day or that night, a call came in for a large number of jumpers, I can't remember, but a large number of jumpers to jump on the head of the fire and hold it until the ground crews could relieve them. And so, we had three airplanes there, two air... three airplanes a Noorduyn-Norseman which would carry about 2 to 4 guys maybe 3 at the best, in hot weather, and the Fairchild 71 and an old Fokker. And those airplanes altogether would only haul about 6 or 7 guys. And they wanted this whole crew of guys on the fire line at daylight. Well the airplanes couldn't make it over the hill, see. It was high country and the Noorduyn would have to circle sometimes for 45 minutes to get over the pass. So, you could see how he could haul... he couldn't get them in there at any time. The Fairchild and the old Fokker were high lift aircraft, oldtimers, the would go right over the hill, but they still had a limited capacity of like 2 to 4 jumpers. So, it was no way that they could do what they wanted to achieve. They just couldn't make it. Couldn't get the crew in there by daylight and with this experience we've had before of jumping on top of it and getting run off it. I called a halt to it and I told the dispatcher at Cave Junction that we would not go to that fire by air. But we wouldn't refuse to go to the fire. We'd go and take a truck. I said, "I'll take a load of jumpers and we'll be on that fire at daylight where you want us and we'll be coordinated with the ground crew and the strategy of the fire and we'll take that order. But I said, "we're not going to allow anymore Region 1 jumpers to go on that fire." And of course that created a terrific stir because you just didn't refuse to jump fires down in that country. Those fellows were trying to build their program and they'd jump in the jaws of Hell, I think, just to get another jump, I guess. I don't know.

But at any rate, that... it really hit the fan when this order came in that Region 1 refused to jump on the fire anymore. So, I wrote a memorandum on the whole situation because I knew there was going to be trouble in camp when I got back and so I wrote a memorandum on it and I have it here if you want it. I'll give it to you, because there's no point in me hanging on to it any longer. But I always kept a copy of it. I almost got fired over the incident because it created such a stir between Regions 5 and 6 and I was kind of in between. And I was the guy that made the problem by refusing to jump the fire. And I got back and I remember my boss asked me how come I pulled a trick like that and he says, "You know, you could get fired for that." And I said, "well, I know I could," but I said, "when you hire a foreman you hire him to take care of the safety of the men and see that things are going right." And uh... well anyway that
answer satisfied him and I didn't get canned. But later they had, that winter, they had a meeting between Regions 1, 5, 6 and all the jumpers got together... people who supervised the programs as well as their fire staff people. And they concluded that they couldn't handle fires in California out of Cave Junction. This fiasco brought that thing to a head and so I think it was only a year later that they started the Redding smokejumper unit, which has been there and prevailed ever since. But it was just a... that was the most frustrating situation that I ever got into, administrative in the smokejumping.

RF That was the Pony Peak fire...

WW Pony Peak fire in California. And I'll have a lot of fun at this reunion talking to some of the guys that were on that fire. Because there were Region 6 men on it and Region 1 men on it. And they were all spooked to death of the thing, see, the guys would go ahead and jump, but they just didn't seem to have the courage to say no. And when I said "no" that really caused a real stink in those days, because you just didn't do those things. But I'm glad I did. But that was the most frustrating incident.

RF You were supposed to be the foreman on the Mann Gulch fire?

WW Yeah. That was a close call and I've wondered about it all my life. I was search and rescue foreman for the Region and a young fellow named Knapp, his dad was a ranger, I can't remember the jumper's first name but Knapp was his last name, jumped on a fire over on the Kaniksu and he slipped out of a tree and broke his back and so they called for a pack out and I went in charge of the crew. And we packed him out all night, we walked all night to get him out. And we got back in Missoula just about 6 o'clock in the morning when that fire call came in and I was first on the foreman jump list, see, I was the first guy out. And the guy said, I can't remember, well I remember but I won't say who was in charge. [He] says, "Wood, get your outfit on. You're going to go to a fire on the Helena." And I said, "gee, that's a rough shuffle." But I went ahead and started hauling my gear out and Fred Fite, the District Fire Dispatcher at that time, in the Regional Office when they read off the list of people who were going on the fire he said, "My God," he said, "Wood is on the Kaniksu." "Well, no he just got in." "Well he's not going on any fire if he's been packing a man out all night." Fred said, "My God, it's fool hardy to send a man that's been up all night long packing men out." That was hard work. Search and rescue work was hard work. So, they took me off the jump list because I really was beat. And so then Wag Dodge had just come in, the fire was just starting to build up and they put Wag in charge of the fire. And then, of course the rest is history. I've often wondered what difference it might have made. I might have been burned up with them. Well, maybe I might have rig... wanted to jump in a different place or maybe I would have had some other tactic. You never know. But I've often wondered about that question because it was sure a stroke of fate that I
happened to be out on this other mission is the only thing that saved me from going on that fire. So, I'll never know, luckily.

RF You had more experience with these particular men and...

WW Well, that's right. Yeah. I uh... that's a real key point and I'm glad you mentioned it. I'd forgotten that. I've always had the impression that that disaster may not have occurred or might have been much less severe, less casualties, if Wag had been working with the guys. But you see, he was a skillful carpenter and so they would use him out on the forests on project work, to do carpenter work for neighboring forests and things. And he had no opportunity to train or be with those guys. Where I had trained with all of them, trained them and jumped practice jumps with them and knew them, they knew me and I knew them. And I think sometimes there was... not a credibility gap, but there was some fact that they weren't confident, they didn't know Wag. And so when he gave the orders to do what... the orders he gave they says, "the Hell with it," and over the hill they went, trying to outrun that fire. It might have been with a foreman they had more confidence with, they might have taken instructions. But on the other hand, I may not have had the presence of mind to burn out a spot like Wag did and do that. So, you never know. But I really do think that if the crew had had more experience working with Wag, had more confidence in him, why I think they would have stayed with him. I really think that would have been. So, I've always been a strong one... that's another reason why I've favored decentralized training sometimes because the men got to know the people they work and train with. Whereas, if you send a bunch of men into a big central base and they train with 10 guys, we'll say on the instructors cadre, then they go back out on the forest and here comes foreman and fire guys they don't even know. At least for a season or two, or till they get broken in. So, I always felt that was a contributing factor. Now I don't know if whether it holds water or not, but it's always bothered me that they had that aspect, was that the fellows didn't know Wag at all. There was two squad leaders that knew him. But Bill Heilman and Dan McVay, they knew Wag but hadn't worked with him too much. But the other guys had never seen him before, to my knowledge. I always felt that that was a bummer and it didn't seem to me that when they analyzed the fire, they tried to find the faults and the reasons and everything, they seemed to me they glossed over that aspect, in the board of revue, for the fire.

RF That disaster led to you designing some... a shelter? Didn't it?

WW Well, yeah. That's right. That fire, if those guys had even had a canvas to throw over them, they wouldn't have died. And so later when I was assigned to the Missoula Development Center and they gave us a project on protective clothing and fire proof gear and so forth, why I thought of that Mann Gulch Fire, and I thought, "My God, if they would have had anything at all, anything that would reflect that radiant heat, that's about the
only thing you can survive is radiant fast flash fire, you're not going to survive a heavy fire, you know heavy fuels but flash fires you could... when I was reading the journals of Lewis and Clark I... Bernard DeVoto, about the journals of Lewis and Clark. In that story of his travels he, one of either Clark or Lewis had witnessed and incident where a squaw had thrown a green buffalo hide over a baby that was about to be run over by a grass fire. She knew... she ran and threw the buffalo hide over the baby and the baby survived. Well, that kind of sparked a thought in my mind, of Hell, if we had an aluminum foil shelter of any kind, it would have saved those guys on the Mann Gulch Fire. So, we went ahead and developed it, and it's the shape of a teepee and of course it led on... later on they advanced it and improved it and so forth. But that was the starting point of the thing. But it was the Mann Gulch fire that... I know those guys would have escaped with nothing... no more than maybe a little smoke inhalation because the fire just ran right over them and seared then. And if they had had anything to reflect that heat for a few minutes... and then later on I proved it by... we had a fire, we built a big slash fire and I went and got inside the tent and stayed through it for several minutes until the fire cooled down. It proved to myself and others that they would have survived it easily. So, they went ahead and took the shelter and made it standard equipment all over the country. And I understand it saved quite a few lives. I don't know, I've never followed up on it. So maybe that's one thing the Mann Gulch fire did. Gave us a new piece of equipment. I know a lot of guys have cussed it because it's heavy and hard to pack around. You wear it on your waist you know. And it's another pain in the neck to a guy who thinks he's never going to get burned. But I do understand that some... they've saved quite a few lives with it.

RF You say you were involved in parachute equipment and smokejumping equipment?

WW Yes.

RF Later part of your career or...?

WW Well, I kind of graduated or transcended from the parachute project after about 10 years in the jumping program. They were trying to get some new ideas... they were trying to start a development center. At least improve, modernize equipment. So, I got assigned to that project. And I had an opportunity to... I knew the short comings of a lot of... much of our equipment you know. So, I had an opportunity in that program to try to improve it. And one simple thing comes to my mind, was as we transferred from Ford Trimotors and Travelaires and old slow airplanes into the Dougs and faster ships, they wouldn't... they were faster and so when we'd throw these little drift... we used to make drift chutes we called them, out of a bag of sand with a piece of unbleached muslin and four strings tied to the corners. A kids backyard parachute, see. We'd throw those out, well they'd work fine out of the Ford Trimotor and those old slow planes, but when we got into Dougs, they just popped the lines off of them right
and left. You'd have to throw a half a dozen before you ever got one that would maybe work. It was a real pain. So, a friend of mine, who flew a helicopter, wanted to know if he could figure out some way to tell what the wind was like on a spot when he was going to go around a helicopter, with no wind socks in the back country, see. He asked me to do something for him and so I did. I took some crepe paper, orange crepe paper, and taped some black paper to it and then put a string on it with a buck shot on it. So, when you throw it out, why it would down over the spot where you wanted to land and then the wind... the buckshot would melt into the sand or the snow kind of and then, in the wintertime when he was in that situation. Then the black end would be pointing into the wind so he would know which way the wind was blowing see. And he tried them out and hell it worked fine for him. So, it occurred to me, well why don't we try this instead of drift chutes. And so I made up some minor or some drift chutes and sent them around to the jumpers and boy they went over like hotcakes. And they've been there ever since. And I think they save us a lot of money over the years. And they're much more reliable than the drift chutes and more easier to see, because you can use big long streamers of colored cloth and paper and it worked out real good. So, that was one of the things that I feel good about as far as the jumpers.

RF You invented the drift streamers then?

WW Yeah. As a matter of fact, we had the Forest Service... the first user of drift streamers, as far as I know, anywhere in the world. Because we had a guy oh Jack something, he was a French character, a French sky diver, the first guy to start introducing sky diving around the world. He came through to visit the jumper base and we showed him these drift streamers and right after that I noticed that these guys when they were trying out for the world Olympics and all of that they are all throwing drift streamers. So, we had a first on that anyway. Then we did a lot of work improving the parachute harness. We ended [up] upgrading the parachute. We made the 5-A which was just an over sized standard slotted parachute. Since then they've improved that terri­fically. And oh new harnesses and new padding, things of that sort. Better protective gear. We made some good strides in that, I'm sure. And mostly because new hardware became available. There wasn't any ingenuity in design or anything on our part, it's just that the Army was starting to use new quick release hardware and things like that, which we adapted. Things like that. But I was also the guy who put the seatbelt in the jumpsuit instead of having it separate. Used to have a letdown belt, I should say. We used to have a separate belt to let yourself down out of the parachute harness with. You had to leave the parachute harness and come down on a belt, which was dragging around the middle and just squeeze the wind out of you. So, I got the idea of putting in the seat make a seat sling out of it and put it in a suit. So, when a guy popped out of the harness he could just come down sitting down in a... it worked out good and it was adopted. But it was a real good challenging job and I really enjoyed it. I stayed in it from that time on, after I was a jumper for 10
years. I still jumped and went on fires when I was at the center because I've always been in fire control and when you're in fire control if you're able bodied you go to a fire when needed. But I wasn't in the parachute project. I was in the summertime on the fire program and then in the wintertime I would be on the development center.

[INTERRUPTION]

My first idea was of course I had a piece of stiff cardboard at the bottom with a string and the shot because I wanted... and I thought quite important to have that black target pointing into the wind. Well anyway, a fellow down at Cave Junction, when we sent them to him, well they liked them fine and everything, but he conceived the idea of using wire in the head of the thing. And so, it was a good idea and he sent it back to us, we tried it and we adopted it right of the bat. But the funny part was, he got a $300 cash award for the idea and we didn't get anything in Region 1. He laughs about that today. You know he says, "You guys invented it and we just dolled it up and got the money for it." It was kind of funny. I hope that guys out there. I'm going to see him, I hope, at the reunion.

RF What was the most incredible jump experience you had? Something that would be the most unbelievable for me?

WW Well, being as you're a sky diver, it might not be unbelievable but I think hanging on a thermal for about 7 minutes one time, was kind of a unique thing, it wasn't unusual, it happened all the time. But I was in Big Prairie and the plane came in for our practice jumps and I spotted the guys out and come around and make a jump myself. And I got on a thermal and I couldn't get off of it. I just couldn't steer off the thing for quite a long time. Here the airplane's circling around and around and around and I'm going up and everybody's going down and the airplane finally landed and the airplane's on the ground and it had another bunch of jumpers loaded up before I ever got back down on the ground. That was, excuse me, that was one. Another one of course, I had a jump up on the West Fork of Fish Creek and the parachute line, something happened I had a malfunction and lines broke when my chute opened. And when I looked up to see what went on, I mean it was just a normal opening, it popped open and everything but I had a Mae West and had lines all around my mask and my helmet, neck and everything, which was a little spookie for a while. So, I fooled around and I could see I still had lines on the one riser, although there must have been a half a dozen lines broken or more. But I could see that I had lines still on the thing. So, I just started reefing on the lines and I pulled the thing off, which surprised me because it looked like it was right across the middle, but some how or another, maybe because the other lines were broken or something it popped off and I came in with an uneventful landing. That's the only hairy one I can think of.

RF Ever get a chance to use your reserve?
WW  Never did.

RF  Have many instances where people did at all or...?

WW  Oh yeah. Oh we had lots of them. Yeah. I've had lots of observations that were a lot spookier than anything that I went into. I saw one fellow jump at Six Mile one time, when we were camped... or jumping at Six Mile and the camp was at Nine Mile. And this fellow, a CPS guy, went out, well hooking up and he fell out of sight behind the ridge from camp where I was watching him. I watched this guy come down free falling and I thought he was a gonner for sure. But the ridge was high enough that he got his reserve open and popped it just before he hit the trees. And I thought for sure that was a fatal, just positive it was. But by God, his name was Ad Carlson, and he popped that chute, but he didn't know what was going on. He hadn't jumped too much before and he was waiting for the chute to open and it never opened. So, finally looked around and cracked his reserve, just before he hit the trees. That was a close one. And there were lots of those, lots of streamers. I mean lots, I say over a period of watching them for 20 to 30 years why you see lots of weird things but there were lots of streamers. And I saw another incident where a friend of mine, Al Cramer, hooked on and as he went out his chute didn't open, so he cracked his reserve and so somebody said he didn't hook up. He says, "well he did hook up," and the spotter said, "yes he did hook up." Well anyway, even the Regional Office staff man got in there and he says, "well you couldn't have hooked up," and he accused Al of being a... telling a falsehood on it. We proved later that the snap hook can come off. Even when we had those new modern ones like the paratroopers used, I mean with the flat button and all of that, (inaudible). So, then from that time we started putting pins in them because even though you had that safety button on there certain vibrations of that cable, we found out, could... the snap could pull down and back up at a real fast rebound and it would force that button... it would make the slide override the button and the thing could come off. So, after that we put collar keys in them. I don't know... I think probably... you know I think probably cargo dropping was more hairy than jumping because you were flying in the mountains and the wind didn't have conditions you weren't... couldn't really you know... the pilots really had to know mountain weather. Then you're dawn dropping 200 feet above, sometimes 150 feet above the trees in those canyons and turbulent air and all that. I had some close ones in that one. I mean like chutes hitting the tail and things like that. And at that elevation there's no way out, I mean you don't have time to get out and then had the engines quit and start again on the cargo drop run and things like that. But I think probably the total hazard exposure is much greater in cargo dropping than it probably is in jumping because you're up high normally jumping, you've got some time, buy time, but when you're dropping cargo right on the deck, there's no time for anything if something goes wrong.

RF  Yeah. Cargo drops were done a lot lower than...
Oh yeah. They were done at tree top. Just above the tree tops. Just see... so they wouldn't drift in the wind. So 200 feet was about average, maybe 150 feet for a cargo drop.

So if you got thrown out of the plane at that altitude, would your... your chute would barely open.

You wouldn't... your reflexes and all things involved you wouldn't have time. Unless you had it cracked on the way out, crack it just almost let it pull you out of the plane, you'd never had a chance, in most cargo drops. Now they might have... maybe they've raised the elevation, but we used to get right on the deck because that way the chute wouldn't drift in the wind and it was more accuracy. And we used to throw tree climbers and things out, we had to get down low to throw those things out because it was hard to estimate the trajectory and all of that. So, I think probably the hairiest part of jumping really is probably in the cargo dropping because you have... there is nothing to forgive when you're down low and something goes wrong, there's no time.

That was part of your job as foreman and spotter then to make the...

Yeah. I did an awful lot of cargo dropping of all kinds. Experimental, big things, we dropped bridge cables on roads that were... well we dropped them out of a Doug, I think 2000 lb. rolls of cable and things like that. It was all new experiences. But I think probably in my opinion the cargo dropping was the number one hazard and I think maybe fire fighting number two. The jumping is really not as dangerous as it could be or is thought to be.

So, you made about 80 jumps, but you made hundreds more cargo runs didn't you?

Oh yeah. I got, oh gosh yeah, I could cover western Montana with cargo chutes that I've dropped, I think because we did an awful lot of cargo. Well see, we dropped cargo to big fires and other things to, not just jumpers. Jumpers you would go out and drop them in and then go down low and drop the cargo. But on these big fire camp drops, why we'd drop... go right in and drop a lot of, well a Doug, it think 5000 lbs. of equipment, all of them small loads. So, we made repeated passes at low level. Probably the only thing more dangerous than that is retardant dropping, I think is more dangerous by far. But that's not in... you know, that's a different field, but it's more hazardous.

Are there any other jumps you want to tell me about, things that you remember that...?

No. I can't think of any...

Fires?
Oh no. No. Jumped on a fire one time on the St. Joe. This was not hairy or hazardous but I was in charge of fire, so I split the crew and started him around, and a fellow named Herb Oertli was one of the squad leaders and I said, "Herb you take this side of the fire and the other guy take the other side and I'll go scout the fire line out where... and mark the (inaudible) And it was getting dark and it was just lots of tangle foot, alder and brush. And really you have to swim through it, you couldn't walk. So, I went around the fire and sized it up and come back to the crew and we all went back in and worked to late at night and got a line around it until 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning and so when we got back to camp, I was belly aching I'd lost my wrist watch on that... swimming through that brush. And I said, "Bob, that was a good watch." I was crying in my coffee over it and old Herb Oertli says, "would this be it," and he pulled it out of his pocket. And he found it. It was a miracle he found that watch in the worst [inaudible] tangle you've ever seen in your life. He just... his headlight just happened to spot something gleaming and he reached down and picked it up. And it was stuff that... if I'd have organized a whole crew and looked for a whole week we couldn't have found it. Just the happen stances. Just a miraculous thing. But that had nothing to do with the fire, it was an easy fire. But I can't think of any other jumps that were exciting.

Oh well wait a minute. I had one one time at Big Prairie and a cook helped me suit up, which is a mistake right of the bat, but he hooked my outfit up backwards and I didn't pay any attention to it. And I jumped in the airplane, went right up and jumped and uh... the reason I did it because we had a jump and it was called off and so I just laid back where the parachute table and unhooked all of my gear see, and crawled out, left it laying on the parachute table so I could get back in it quick, which I did, too quickly. Anyway, hooked my chest straps into the riser someway. When the chute opened, it pulled my... my back pack pulled my head up like this see, and slipped my harness way up and I couldn't get my head up to see whether I had any canopy or not. I finally got a good grip on and pulled it down, I could see I had a chute. Then I had to just steer on the thing right into the ground. And I had my head pressed against my chest so bad I could hardly see. We had that collar on there too. The collar was in the way. It was kind of hairy for awhile. But it was nothing really... chute was open, everything was fine but I didn't know it. But it was a dumb thing to do, to let that guy help me and not check it. And I can't remember why the spotter didn't check it either. He just didn't look at it carefully enough.

RF Is the spotter's responsibility to check the gear?

WW Oh yeah. You're responsible first to suit up and then you check your buddy, check each other and then the squad leader, spotter in the final analysis, he's supposed to check you the final check. At least it was in those days. I don't know what they're doing today. But it was just a case of multiplied errors. It was my error in the first place for not being more
serious about it. You know, that's one of the things that I can think of. Yeah, I can't think of anything else that was outstanding. I remember one time I jumped on a fire and got the wind knocked out of me, in a tree. My chest pack hit a limb when I swung into it and knocked my wind out. I remember old Earl Cooley jumped on the same fire with me. And I was hanging in the tree and I wouldn't talk to him, I could talk to him. He says, "Hey Willy," he used to call me Willy, "Willy what are you doing up there." And I sucking air because it had knocked my wind out and I finally got my breath and got down out of the tree, but he thought maybe I was injured or something. I never got hurt except the first jump or so. I made a sprained ankle, I think, was on the first jump, but didn't do anything. Just jumped the next day. Was no big sweat. We used to wear a lot of protective equipment that wasn't necessary. We found out later.... we used to brace our ankles with leather braces and were abdomen pads and all of that stuff. But it wasn't necessary. But we didn't know it.

RF I hear a lot about those Eagle parachutes and their opening shock. Did you get to experience any of those?

WW Oh, you bet I did. I'm still living with a back from that... from uh... got it in my diary too. But I didn't have brains enough to report it. It wouldn't make any difference but I got such an opening, I just saw stars you know. Just like when you get hit on the head real hard. I think I was temporarily knocked out. But that night when I went to roll over in bed I couldn't turn over in bed. But anyway, that chute just opened so hard that it just... it just must have dislocated a vertebra. I went to a vet... or an osteopath and got it straightened out and it didn't bother me for a long time. But it's starting to show up again now. But those chutes would open so hard that you could hear them, they sounded like a shotgun going off. From miles around you could hear them go whap! And I've seen chunks of silk three feet square blown right out of the top of them. Just float down along side the parachute. They open terrifically fast because they open from the bottom. They had a flare... they had a fluted skirt all around the bottom and they just popped wide open like that. I've never seen a chute open any faster than that. Even the military finally developed some chutes that had explosives in the perimeter, to open them fast. But I think if they wanted to use Eagles, they'd of done... got her open just as fast. Cause boy they were fast. But they... and they were not good chutes really. Some would turn and some wouldn't. Get a hold... we all had our favorites. Certain numbers were good turners and others were just dogs. But they were really rough customers, those Eagle chutes. I was glad to see those go.

RF At the end of World War II, when the decision was made to not let the COs continue, do you remember the COs being bothered by that at all?

WW No. I didn't know there was any... it was a foregone con-
elusion to me... or that I never heard any scuttle butt on that at all. To me it was a foregone conclusion, that when the war was over and the guys that went to the service would have a line of retreat and come right back and go to work. There were some outfits I guess were in Region 6 at that time, that retained some of those guys after the war, hired... put them on and hired them which they were skilled firefighters and offered a job. Now I've got some reservations, if they gave preference to those guys over a GI, a returning GI, I think that was wrong. The GI should have had first call in my opinion. But I think that happened in Region 6. But in Region 1, I can't recall any COs staying on soon as the... in 1946 when the guys were getting out of the service, I don't recall having a CO on the place.

RF Do you recall whether the COs wanted to... some of them ever talk to you and say, "I want to stay on."

WW No. I wasn't maybe close enough to any of them. But I don't recall. I knew a lot of them real well. None of them ever... I never had any conversation with any of them about any desire on their part to stay with them. Most of them are just like anybody else, want to get home and get on with their life. But some of them did stay. I know there were... I think several that stayed in Region 6, that worked for a few seasons. Well, as a matter of fact, Skinny Beals is a squad leader from Region... he's retired now, he spent his entire life after... he was a CO, and they hired him up at Winthrop, Washington. He stayed there a few years. And he bounced around Region 6 bases his entire career and retired a few years ago. A hell of a good man. And that's right, I'd forgotten about him. But I don't think he put up any fight to stay. Other than he just wanted to stay. And I think he was probably like everyone else he had to buck for a raise once in a while. But I don't recall in Region 1 any problem or any concern. But it might all have gone on in the higher echelons and we didn't know a thing about it. See it could have been a decision made uptown that none of us just knew anything about. But I never... I don't think Phil Stanley and Flacus and those guys wanted to stay with the project.

RF No, they said they didn't.

WW No, I don't think so.

RF They had other things they wanted to do.

WW Yeah. Yeah. A lot of them had... college professors and everything else.

RF We've gone through a lot of... a lot of time here. You have a long career.

WW Oh God it is. It's 12:30.

RF But one thing that would probably help us out on the tape is if you could just kind of outline your career from '41 or '43 on.
Just what your positions were and things like that.

WW Well I was uh... in 1941 I was in flying hot shot crew, they flew us around the fires, at camp Nine Mile. Then '42 I worked for the Department of Immigration out at the... they had a bunch of Japanese prisoners and Italian prisoners at Fort Missoula, and I worked out there. Then '43 I went to work at Seeley Lake and I stayed with the parachute project for 10 years as a... through all smoker... jumper grades up to foreman grade. And then I transferred into the Missoula Equipment Development Center which was being formed then. And I spent 7 years there and... I can't remember what grade I had even, 9 or 11. Anyway, small matter. After I put in that time at the Missoula Equipment Development Center I had an opportunity to transfer to Washington D.C., which I did for 4 years, I spent in Washington D.C., which was really a rewarding job I thought, in some ways. Then in '64 I transferred out to Portland, Oregon as a principle assistant to the fire chief in charge of smokejumping, and their equipment and supplies—in addition to the smokejumping duties I had equipment and supplies. And I stayed there until I retired in 1975. So, but in that... of course in that job I expanded for... I had the smokejumper bases at Winthrop and Cave Junction and Redmond, Oregon, were all... I was technical assistant to the fire chief on matters concerning smokejumping. So I was in the smokejumping business really. But quite a bit of the time. And I had equipment.... experience with smokejumping equipment so whenever we had some new piece of equipment come out, I always had to get in the act. Or it got channeled to me whether I wanted it or not. But it's been a rewarding lifetime experience for me. I don't regret the first day I signed on. I think that's about the size of it.

I had one other item I take some pride in. That was the smokejumper retirement or firefighter retirement. When I was in the Washington office, I wrote a memo to... or just a note to a friend of mine who was in a high place there and told I thought the jumpers were getting screwed on this retirement because the CIA and the FBI and all these guys were getting 20 year retirement. I still have the letter... original memo I wrote... note... penciled notes. And he wrote around to all the people in the Forest Service, at that point, and by gosh they took a hold of it and they entered the smokejumpers names as an eligible government group, for early retirement. And it stuck on and the guy that did that was a fellow... a ranger from, he was on the Nez Perce anyway. And he jumped on a fire, he was on one of these fires, I knew him personally. I talked to him a little about it. And anyway he was legislative and liaison officer for the Washington Office. So, he nosed around and found out there was a bill under effect that was going to allow federal firefighters, airport firefighters, aircraft firefighters, attached to service bases into this early retirement thing. And so my note hit just about the right time that it put the smokejumper program in that. And the smokejumpers got their early fire retirement, the first ones in the Forest Service to get on the eligibility list. Then later they added pilots and firefighters. But I felt real good about that and it was because we did a good
job of fighting fire for that ranger. He knew what the score was. I better shut up, I'll talk you to death.

RF No. That's OK. Was that Ranger Galbreith?


RF OK.

WW I've got the memo here on the thing, the note. And I think probably to sum it all up, my most... permanent memories are more rescue stuff. I was in a lot of rescue work. And that's about all I've got to say I guess. I had more experiences in rescue that stick with with than I did fighting fire. I don't know why, but it was a more personal thing I guess, a rescue was. And I was search and rescue foreman for several years and I got into a lot of stuff there. I could tell some real bear stories on that.

RF Well if you want to give us another interview, we'll talk about rescue.

WW No. That's get out of here.

RF Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

WW Well I'm sorry I talk too much but anyway... well I didn't want to... you don't probably want the...

[END OF INTERVIEW]