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KR [Tell us] a little bit about your years with the Forest Service and smokejumping, what year was it that you started?

WW I started in the Forest Service in 1958 on the Shasta-Trinity in California. I worked three years on the Shasta-Trinity, '58, '59, '60. The summer of '61, I was on a hot-shot crew on the San Bernadino National Forest in Southern California, Converse hot-shots. That's the summer I graduated from university. And then I... '61, actually, I was supposed to jump in Missoula. I was accepted in '61 as a smokejumper, but I couldn't pass the eye... whoops, better turn it off.

KR No, go ahead.

WW Oh, I was just gonna turn it off. In '61 I was suppose to jump for the Forest Service in Missoula, but I couldn't pass the eye test. And so I kind of gave up my jump... a year jumping until 1966-67, I taught in Canada and on the way back from Canada we came down through Glacier [National Park] and to Missoula. I'd never been to Idaho or Montana at that time until then. And I came to the jump base in '67 and I had to apply one more time and the summer of '68 was the last summer I could jump, because at that time you could not be over twenty-eight years old to jump as a new man. And so they did accept me again in '68 and as far as passing the eye test, I failed it. I couldn't pass it, but when I went to take the eye test at the doctors... I don't know if this is really interesting, or not. [inaudible] [laugh]

KR Yeah, interesting to me. Keep talking.

WW I'll never forget, I went to the doctor at a hospital in Walnut Creek, California, and it came time to take the eye test and I knew I was gonna fail because my eyes... I have terrible eye sight, and... But I went into the office to have the doctor check my eyes, read the chart. And I remember the nurse had me read with my glasses on one of the eyes, which I could read perfectly, and then the phone rang and I had no idea who it was—God or somebody—it was a phone call and she said that the doctor would be delayed probably ten minutes. So she asked me to wait in the room by myself with the eye chart. So I memorized the first four lines. I used to know it, E, S, P, L, T, Q, S—something to that effect, which, I think, got me down far enough to the minimum requirements. And sure enough, five or ten minutes she came back and she let me read it... my other eye with my glasses on and then she took my glasses off, and I had no idea at the... but I just... I said, "I can only read the first four lines." And I read them... memorized them. If she would have
pointed and said, "Read this line." I would have been dead. But anyway, that's how I passed the eye test. So there's somebody out there in Middle America that got me the job, who I don't know with that mysterious phone call. There must be a God. And... so, '68... I was talking to Bird (?) out there, he and I trained together... broke in, but we trained in '68, Squad Six. We were probably the biggest bunch of guys that ever came through. But it's the best job I ever had... best experience, I'm sure everyones told you that. It really is true.

KR So, what was that like that first year? You went in to training... you had fire fighting experience.

WW Right, I had four summers previously and the summer in Southern California would be... they're called I.R. [Inter-regional] crews now, but that was an amazing summer. I would... had visions until then, actually, of possibly--even though I did not major in forestry--of making a career out of the Forest Service, but that one summer I spent in Southern California on a hot-shot crew down there convinced me that it was not going to be in fire control, at least not in Southern California. Because not only is it very hot, but the brush fires down there are real toasty. And then, of course, I joined the Marine Corps... the Marine Corps Reserve because either that or get drafted. And then I got married and started teaching, you know, things of that nature. So '68 finally came around, I gave it another shot. And the first year. Well, the first year my daughter, who was two at the time... three or four, I guess, she and I drove up in my '66 Opal Cadet, my ex-wife and our new born son, he was about a year... a year and a half, I guess, flew up two or three days before to get housing here and my daughter Evette and I drove up in the little station wagon with all of the, you know, pots and pans... blankets. And I remember coming through Challis, Idaho, I... actually it was just before Challis; Clayton, Idaho, the car broke down. So I was off to a bad start already. We had to have the car towed from Challis, Idaho, to Missoula. And that was transmission problems, but I remember, yes, that was an unusual way to start off my new career. I do remember we had to train at 6:00 in the morning, I remember that. We didn't get paid or anything, we just accepted it as part of the job, I remember that.

KR What was training like? Do you remember it?

WW Well, I said I have the... [laugh] I know that I never had such a good time in my whole life. The squad I was with, we tended to be a little older as far as chronology is concerned. I'm not too sure we were any older as far as maturity is concerned. But we certainly had a lot of laughs together. And yes, I remember the first week, we had to go out on what is called New Man's Camp, and I remember we were first... one of the first mornings walking up this hill for some reason, there were, I don't know, sixty of us or something and I remember some... one kid decided to quit right then. It wasn't much of a hill, no bigger than that hill there. And [laugh] I remember he just kind
of pulled himself out of line and I remember being W, I was at the end of the line, by the time I walked by, he was kind of looking at no one in particular, I'll never forget, he said, "I'm a politician, not a fucking mountain goat." [laugh] That's how he... that kind of set the tenor, I thought, of the time... or of the way the guy... I don't know, it either tells me something about mountain goats or politicians, I don't know. But it was... yeah, it was just great. The scare, obviously, of the first jump. If I could have resigned then, I would have. [laugh] There's no doubt about that.

KR Can you remember the first jump?

WW Oh, yeah, I was petrified, sure. There's no doubt about it, I was petrified, and I happened, again being W there was a kid behind me, Gary Youngquist, who is a foreman with the Forest Service, still, in Missoula. I think he'd been in the airborne. To this day I have no idea how I got off the plane, but I'm sure he shoved me. But we went out two at a time, and, of course, he and I were the last two to go out. So the plane would grind around and around, I watched all these other guys go out and get tension and get scared, you know. You know, "I must be crazy to do this." I do remember the first jump, too, of course. I happen to be color blind, also, and I remember standing... they said that when you got... when the chute opened, then you were to look for the spot, which would be a panel... some kind of a plastic panel on the ground and to go for the spot. Well, that didn't really mean too much to me, I'd... you know, I certainly wasn't gonna tell anybody, "What are you talking about, a spot?" It could be a piece of canvas, or something. It was supposed to be, I think, yellow or green... I forgot. Well, I had no idea what this would be all about, but I remember when the chute opened the first time, I was so happy, of course [that] it opened, and I told myself... well... I was hangin in the harness I said, "I don't think... it's working, everything's fine, I don't think I want to move." You know, I could see the ground, everything was fine. Then I remembered, of course, I was supposed to go for the spot. So I looked down, and I made a couple of turns which I do remember doing that. And I could see things down there and I finally located this rectangular... yellow rectangle, and I figured that must be what they're talking about, the spot. Actually, it was an orange panel against a green meadow grass, and I could... I was not able, really, to decipher the orange and the green, but I could certainly see the shadow. So I figured that's good enough for me, that must be the spot. And it was a school bus, it was the bus that we were supposed to go back. Well, I realized that, of course, at about 300 or 400 feet from the ground. But by then, "Who's the guy over there?" [laugh] So I do remember that. That was unique, I suppose. I never too many people about that on that day, I know that. But a year or two later I was talking about it. Yes, I'd forgotten about that.

KR What is is about smokejumping that... you were accepted once, you didn't pass the eye test, what made you go back for
that second time? What made you go after it? You had to try
that one last time to get accepted into the program. What made
you memorize the eye chart... eye test?

WW  Well [pause] I suppose to see if I was good enough to do it.
I know there was pressure as far as at that time an age
requirement. It was, you know, then or never. I'd always wanted
to do it. I was teaching and I still had my summers free. I
taught summer school once, that wasn't what I had in mind. I...
as I said, I went to Canada and taught, so I had spent two
summers going up and coming back from Canada. I worked in a
warehouse one summer, that's not what I had in mind. And I, as I
say, I did enjoy the woods anyway. One of the advantages of
being a school teacher, of course, you have your summers free.
But actually I read a story, I think when I was in seventh grade,
about... in some little book about smokejumping, and I remember
it was that early that it dawned on... I thought it would be an
exciting... it was the excitement, sure. The excitement, and, of
course, being man enough to do it. That's about it. But once I
got into it, it was still exciting, that's for sure, but it was
some interesting people to work with that makes it worth while.
[inaudible] I imagine everybody's told you that, too.

KR Uh-huh. Common thing. What about the difficulty of
being... running through the [inaudible]

WW Yeah, yeah. It's like joining the Marines. Anybody can
join the Army or anybody can work for the Forest Service, but not
very many people can be jumpers.

KR So '68 was your first season, what was that like?

WW Well, my first fire jump... well, as I say, there's lots of
stories about Squad Six, so I'll let that slide. But my first
fire jump, I thought was rather unique because it was above the
Arctic Circle. In Alaska, they took... you know, after you...
after the noon and after you train, then they drew our names out
of a hat and I... I think there were about fifty-four or fifty-
five new men that year eventually, and I think I was like number
forty-seven. I was way down on the list. Well, you know, they
took the first thirty right up here to Seeley Lake, or something,
on some pounder. So all of a sudden instead of being, you know,
out here just walking, you know, being bused to a fire, all of a
sudden I got up the list and they had... they sent a bunch of us
to Alaska. Which, of course, was just dazzling. I had my
seven practice jumps and now it was time. And I never thought I
would get to jump so quickly. But a friend of mine... the friend
who made that statue, "Tiger" Thompson, who also trained with
Squad Six, he and I and another kid named Mike Bina, who were all
new men back then, we jumped on a fire out of Katzabuh (?) I
remember that. Milt Freedenberg was on it, who is a doctor now,
but he happens to live in the same area where I am and I still
keep in touch with Milt. But anyway, I remember that. I thought
it was rather unique when you first fire jump... even though you
were trained here in Missoula, to be [sent] to the Arctic Circle.
It was on Nooatack (?), that was the name of the little village, a place called Nooatack. We came out at Katzabuh, I remember having to stay overnight in Katzabuh. Taking a bath in a bathtub that was just green from the water deposits or something. But that was my first fire jump. It was unique, of course, because in Alaska you don't use regular... at least most of the time we did not use our regular fire tools. We cut down some spruce trees and beat the fire out, which was a new experience. Certainly you don't do that in Southern California. And so that was a new experience. The other thing that was new, I must admit, in talking about fire fighting techniques, Southern California, which is where I really learned about fire behavior, fire control, fire suppression. You cut a line ten feet wide, it was very hot on... it was very skilled, that is, on the fire crew in Southern California, if you were a cutter, you became an expert... a cutter. If you were a raker, or if you used the McCloud or the shovel, you were very skilled in that. There wasn't much... it was a very specialized crew, we did not have chainsaws at that time. For brush fires you used pulaskis or a McCloud or a shovel. And for some reason I had visions when I came to Missoula they had the same type of deal and you were kind of a jack-of-all-trades here; and the fire lines, you know, are not ten feet wide by any means, which is fine with me. And, of course, the heat it not as great. I don't know how I got off onto that, but... oh, well, as I was saying, I went to Alaska and got cutting down [inaudible] tree to beat the fire out.

KR You had the tundra... had to be a different experience?

WW Yeah. Later on I remember being in Alaska... I don't remember which... I do remember when man landed on the moon. When Neil Armstrong took his first step, a helicopter came by with a load speaker. It's funny, the things you do remember. I remember exactly what I was doing when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and I remember exactly what I was doing when man landed on the moon, which, I think, was fifteen years ago this month. I was in Alaska on a fire rubbing... putting out a little stump and that's about what I remember that I was doing, because this helicopter came by with a load speaker and simply said, "Man has landed on the moon." I always thought that was interesting because here I was back in the Stone Age. OK.


WW But that and the other... nothing, really. I remember the fire season ended very quickly... very abruptly about the middle of August. And, as a matter of fact, I was... towards the middle of August my wife... ex-wife and my two children headed back to California because I was supposed to leave in a couple of more weeks and I was gonna ride back with another jumper, and a big storm came through here and drenched everything. And word came out the fire season wouldn't get going again for another two to three weeks and so this other jumper and I actually beat my family home. So it ended very quickly, I know that, in '68.
KR Do you remember any big fires, or anything unusual about '68?

WW Not about '68, you know.

KR So then you jumped in '69?

WW '68, '69, '70 I went to Alaska. That was the thing I remember about those first three summers. I also went to Idaho and Washington and... but I kind of got into a syndrome that every summer I was gonna come to Missoula and train and then go to Alaska. The other thing, I suppose, that was a little unusual, it was not until 1970 that I got a two man... what is called a two-manner or two man fire. And I'd always heard about these two-manners, sometimes they were good deals and I guess all the fires I'd been on were four-manners, or eight, a Doug load, or something like that. And I never complained, but I realized that sometimes a very small fire was a lot more enjoyable when it's just two of you.

KR Why is it a good deal if it's just two?

WW Well, the fire line might be as big as this bed, you know. So you took more effort getting to the fire and getting off the fire than actually putting out the fire. You know, that happens sometimes. But it... I suppose the first three years the things that I remember the most would be the lack of two-manners and then going to Alaska every summer. In '71 I jumped at Grangeville [Idaho]. I never did come back to Missoula to jump. I went to Grangeville.

KR That was '71?

WW Right. In '71, instead of going to Alaska, I went to Arizona on a... I was a helicopter manager. They had some fires down there and some... but I do remember that. That was a unique experience managing helicopters.

KR Now how did...?

WW Go ahead.

KR How did you get that?

WW Well, it was just one of those deals that they had a bunch of fires down there... they had a large fire on an Indian Reservation... the White River Reservation, or something like that. And so the jumpers, in theory anyway, were trained to do lots of things and so they wanted, I think, twelve jumpers to come down there and man some helispots. Manage... the fire was so large they had these helispots all around the fire and so they took some of us down there and split us up, you know, two of us on each of these little spots around the fire. We stayed there ten or eleven days. Didn't really... you know, you worked a lot in the morning, worked a lot in the evening as the helicopters
brought troops in and took them out, but, you know, then baked around. And so it was... it was another aspect of fire fighting management, you know. Somebody has to do it and it turned out to be a good deal.

KR And that was in New Mexico?

WW I think Arizona.

KR Arizona.

WW I don't really remember. The only jump base I have been into is Silver City, New Mexico.

KR No, not everybody gets to go to all these different jump bases. Jumped in '72?

WW In '71 I went to Grangeville. I jumped '71, '72, '73, '74, '75, '76 in Grangeville. '77, '78 I went back to summer school in California. '79 I jumped, because I thought... and that was gonna be my last summer. I resigned, I think, and they threw me a farewell party and all that, and I went back and jumped last year--'83--in Grangeville, also. But that will be my last one. [laugh] So...

KR Why did you think '79 was going to be your last year?

WW Well, because '79 I was getting out of teaching and getting into another business. And this business that I was setting up, I thought, would not allow me the freedom to jump anymore. But the business, I set it up and it's running very well, and I have some very good employees working for me, so I was able to jump last summer. I'm in the business... I still teach part-time and I run the business and so last summer I got a good work out that I could do. I'm sure it will be my last summer, but I don't know.

KR [laugh] Be careful. What are some of the outstanding things that you remember?

WW Well, that's what I understand... that's why I understand why I'm suppose to be here, is because I have this album that I'm supposed to... according to [John] Harper I'm supposed to leave it here, although it's one of a kind. And another jumper who also trained with me, Willie Von Bracht in 1968--this was Squad Six. He and I, luckily, had an unique experience. If you want to look at the album first (I was told to bring this, you see).

KR What is it about Squad Six? You mentioned this a couple times: Squad Six, Squad Six. I don't know what Squad Six is.

WW Well, as a new man, they take fifty or sixty people and break them up into squads for training. There were nine men in our squad. I guess there were nine in every, we just happened to be the sixth squad. And it just so happened that was in... we
were... I was twenty-eight, and there was another kid about twenty-six, which doesn't sound too much... too unique now, because a lot of people are apparently older than we when they jump the first time. But we... the first week, as I mentioned, at New Man Camp, we were leading the pack for being squad... the new man squad. And then when we... by the end of the training period, four or three weeks later we were in last place, so we [laugh] obviously screwed up. But we certainly had a good time, and we had... and I can't tell you all the stories. I mean it was just so funny. We did what we were supposed to do and... but it just was the luck of the draw that we were T through Z: Tanner, Troyer, Truster... Tanner, Troyer... no, [Bertrand] Tanner, Thompson, [Menno] Troyer, [Tom] Trusler, (that was the first four) and then Willie Von Bracht and Walker... Steve Walker, Freddie Wolff and Gary Youngquist and then I was added, too, so those were the nine fellows. They were all at the reunion except two of them... except Von Bracht and "Tiger" Thompson. But I thought that was pretty good, and quite a few of them, you know, jumped until rather recently, too. But this album is a fire that Willie Von Bracht and I jumped quite by accident in 1970 in the Mission Mountains. It infamous, it's even... you'll notice in there a clipping from the A.P. [Associated Press] wire service.


WW Yeah, it was called the Grey Wolf Lake.

KR Grey Wolf Lake.

WW And I understand I'm supposed to talk about this. [laugh]

KR Yeah, I don't know anything about the Grey Wolf Fire.

WW Well, you can see at the very beginning of the album, there's a letter from the police chief, or something, in Grangeville. This has been cleared by the censors, or for that matter [inaudible] or maybe it was obscene. [inaudible]

KR What... tell me about the Grey Wolf Fire?

WW Well, it was a two man fire right out of Missoula not too far away. That's a picture... that's Willie Von Bracht. And that's Willie Von Bracht and the two of us were over in Washington and some photographer came by and took that. I think that was a year or two before and it was just... for some reason he sent us a copy. There was a bunch of fires over in Washington one summer, they had kind of a circus kind of... a lot of jumpers from all over and this photographer came by... professional photographer, took that of the two of us. But anyway, it just so happened that a year or two later Willie and I happened to end up on this fire, so I put it in this album in case people forget what Willie looks like. I haven't seen Willie for about ten years, I'm not too sure what he's doing, I've heard a lot of rumors about him, but....
KR Your two man fire?

WW Yeah. That's a picture of... that's not... that was the jump spot, it was by Grey Wolf Lake. The fire itself was on a ridge behind this. And lights... this is a picture of Willie and shear caught him, sometimes that'll happen, you'll get lucky. This, of course, is after the fire was put out. And it happened quite by accident that... oh, you know, you've heard the story. It happened just by accident that... and, of course, I won't go into all the details I think the writing underneath the pictures is sometimes are worth more than the pictures.

KR Well, these pictures aren't gonna be on the tape, so just tell me about it in your own words.

WW [laugh] Well, it happened quite by accident. There happened to be some partially clad female hikers in the area close to the jump spot, and so we had a very good time. We carried on the tradition of the Forest Service, and the jumpers especially. And... I mean, you can thumb through the rest of the pictures. [laugh]

KR Did you trade... trade food or rations or something?

WW Well, it was a lot of tit for tat, I suppose you could say that. And luckily Von Bracht had a camera, because if it hadn't... you know, if photographic evidence was not available, of course, no one would believe us at all.

KR Right. How long did this fire last.

WW Never did find the fire. [laugh] No, I shouldn't say we never did. The... we jumped on the lake, and actually I did go up the next day and I did find the log which had been smoldering. It was a lightning... but it rained apparently and had gone out. One... I know there's people don't believe this, but one of the classics of the fire, other than the human beings that we ran into, was while I was checking the fire... we had all of our gear, of course, to take back... and that happens to be a picture of one of the... she's clothed there. She got married about a year later. But one of the highlights of the trip, other than the uniqueness of the photographs... that last picture there, that raft, Willie and I did build that raft. There were some logs there and we took our letdown ropes and we lashed them together and we built a little platform, again, lashing some smaller logs on top of it. And the trail around Grey Wolf Lake got down to the road where we were supposed to go. It was quite a walk. And using our minds not our bodies, we decided to build this raft and float or paddle—we had a shovel, of course—paddle across. And we... when we put the gear on and both of us, it would sink, but if one of us got off, and since I felt confident about swimming, one of us got off it was all right. The first layer of logs would sink, but the little platform that we had on top remained dry. And Grey Wolf Lake is a long lake, it's...
somebody can check it on a map. It must be certainly more than a mile long, because we were at one end and the trail was at the other end. And I... the building of the raft and the construction of the raft and paddling the raft across the lake... Willie took his P.G. [personal gear] bag and walked around. He kind of climbed these cliffs and I paddled it across with the shovel. And it wasn't until I got about dead center in the lake that it dawned on me that, jeez, you know, if I sunk now, obviously, I would lose all this gear. But it was a long way. [laugh] But I... I don't know how many hours it took, but it was Robinson Crusoe time, or Huck Finn, maybe, that might be better. But Willie said he could see me all the way, you know, I couldn't see him, but he could see this little speck out in the middle of the lake. But that was kind of anti-climactic, because we did have a good time. And actually, we had, I don't know, as you can see, the fond farewell. And paddle the raft across and then we got to the other end Willie and I sort of walking down the trail, we happened to run into some mountain climbers coming up. I remember we... they happened to have all kinds of beverages, so we spent the evening with them. So it was... there were a number of firsts, certainly for us if not for the Forest Service. We were both married at the time, also, and I do remember... we are both divorced. [laugh] But I do remember at that time he had the pictures, of course, and Willie... Willie could really tell a story, that's why I really was hoping he would be at this reunion, because he's a super salesman. And he luckily had this little instamatic when he took those pictures. But we kind of made a vow to ourselves that... not to each other, of course, that probably fear and common sense would require that we not say anything to anybody until we got back to Missoula and had the pictures developed. Because if they didn't turn out, you know, they would be thinking it was bad drugs, or something, although that was not the drug culture at that time, but you know, we'd just be lying.

And so we did agree... we went to Condon Ranger Station eventually, that's were we flew out. When we were at Condon, then, "OK, Willie, we will not discuss this with anybody, because there's no sense..." I didn't know what the wives would think about it, let alone... I had an idea what the jumpers would think about it, but I didn't need anymore problems. And I... [laugh] as I say, Willie was a great story teller, as it just so happened, as we flew out of Condon back to Missoula, we flew over Grey Wolf Lake and there were some other jumpers in the plane because there were a series of fires started by the storm. And I'll never forget sitting across from Willie... we must have been in a Twin Otter, I think, and I was looking at him and we looked down and we could see the... I think we could even... I don't know if we could see the raft, we could certainly see what was tied up. There was a lot of debris there at the end of the lake and stuff. And I'll never forget looking at Willie and I could see it wasn't gonna last, because he just started to babble. I mean, he just... he just couldn't control it. And, of course, everybody thought we were full of shit, but he just started babbling. Oh, jeez.
KR And the story came out?

WW And well, the story came out then, but, of course, everybody knowing Von Bracht, it was just, "Sure, Willie." You know, and it was... but we came back to Missoula and I... we got those pictures developed and I remember a fellow named [Hal] Samsel, I don't if you've interviewed him or not, but he's... he was our load master. He was in charge of rigging or something. He retired about ten years ago, but he was a great story teller. And, of course, I remember showing these pictures to Samsel, and "Tiger" Thompson, who made that statue and he was also with squad... he was instrumental... "Tiger" was instrumental, we put it on a little display board, I think, and I remember Samsel was the first person that we showed it to. And it was... it's had a life of it's own. This is before the hippies, too, you know, probably now it's no big deal, but this was the still the Victorian Age--the 1970's.

KR Yeah, just going into the freedom age.

WW Yeah, we weren't... Willie and I were not suppose to jump on this fire. Actually, again, it's more evidence that there is a God. But that morning... er, that night, there was a storm that came through here and Willie and I... Willie... as a matter of fact, Willie was a student here at the University and he was living in married housing and I was living just up here, oh, right where this fire started, actually, by that little A-frame. My wife and I were renting the bottom part of the house and the two kids. And the storm came, I was... I think Willie was number eleven... number seven on the jump list and I was number eleven at that time, and the storm came through, and we could hear it at the night. And, of course, the next morning I kept waiting for the phone to ring. I knew we had to be to work at like 8:00, but if they needed you they would simply phone early. The phone never rang, the phone never rang. Willie finally phoned me up... let me see, it must have been... I was number seven and Willie was eleven, I think, on that list. I was number seven he was number eleven. He phoned me up about 6:00 in the morning, Willie did, And he was further down the list than I and he said, "Hey, you gonna go out to the base?" I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, they just phoned me, they got some fires" I said, "Well, no one's phoned me," I said, "and I'm, you know, I'm supposed to go before you." He said, "Well," he said, "they phoned me and they said we were supposed to go on out there." And I said, "When are we supposed to be there?" He said, "Well, I don't know." And I said, "Well, they haven't phoned me." I said, "Sure, I'll come down we'll have breakfast." So I wandered down to Willie's house and we had breakfast and dinked around. I... we got out to the base around 9:00... er, 8:00, or whenever we were normally suppose to work, I guess. And we were in trouble, because... well, he was in trouble a lot more than I because they never phoned me. So... it was a weekend, it was a day off, that's what it was, it was a day off and they had gone down the list trying to phone these people. And they never phoned me, they phoned Willie and he was further down the list than I was, but he
apparently either didn't want to or they didn't explain to him that he was supposed to get out there. And he, just as a friend, phoned me. So anyway, I remember we got out to the base and, of course, everybody had gone... they jumped all the fires. And there was a fellow named Earl Cooley who was supposed to be kind of the head honcho out there. He was a very nice fellow. He'd made one of the very first jumps, something to that effect, I remember. And...

KR Small reputation with them.

WW So Von Bracht and I got out there, you know, and, you know, he was... we were gonna get in trouble because we had not reported quickly, but it didn't bother me because I knew I had a legitimate excuse, if you wish, that, of course, they had never phoned me. Willie, I guess, although they had phoned him, was not... was led to belief it was not some kind of an emergency or something, although that doesn't quite make sense. Anyway, the two of us went in to see Earl, we were gonna get in trouble. Well, I got off the hook right away, but, you know, to save face for everybody we were gonna be penalized. And I remember that they had a little spotter plane... I don't know, it was a single engine plane out there and they told us to go out and polish the plane, which I thought was just slick, because it was a nice day and the plane was parked in such a manner, that if you run around to the other side of the fuselage and started over there, no one could see you. And so, if that was punishment I thought it was a pretty good deal. And we... of course, we weren't polishing the plane at all. We went out there and were telling lies to each other and laughing and screwing around. And a fire call came, and, of course, at that time... I guess at that time I was number one, because they'd jumped some guys and even though I was number seven I worked... I guess I was number one, so if there was a fire that day, I guess I knew I was supposed to go. And I remember the fire call came and they, you know, the siren went off, so I took off running. I know there was three other people... that's why I say I was number seven and Willie was number eleven. (Is this getting really boring?) But when the siren went off, I took off running, you know, and I could hear, "We have a two-manner blah-blah-blah-blah," someplace, in the Bob Marshall, something. "and the jumpers that will be going are: Woolworth." Which I'm it, so I was running towards the place. And then there was... McCrea was another kid, a red-headed kid, and they read his name off, "Woolworth and McCrea." And you could hear the "blah-blah-blah-blah He's not here." And there was some other name... Whittaker, or somebody... I've forgotten who it was was. I think Whittaker, possibly. "blah-blah-blah-blah" and he wasn't there. And then some other name, and then finally, "Von Bracht?!" And you could tell, oh! this could not be Willerton Von Bracht. So sure enough, we were the two guys and they... we got into the Twin Beech, I remember that. The spotter's name was Eldon Strike. We bought Eldon a case of beer.

KR For that jump?
Yes. Eldon Strike, I do remember that, because when we got to the fire, we couldn't see any fire, there was no smoke. And Eldon, being a good man and to see from the topography there was a very nice lake, and the ridge where it was supposed to be, and sometimes this does happen, you know, the smoke will lie down and it was late in the evening, you know, it was a good idea if there was a fire and he pointed out where it was supposed to be. And it'd been a slow year anyway, I guess and... I hope I'm not getting Eldon in trouble [laugh] I think there's a statute of limitations but anyway, he kicked us out. I remember I hung up in a tree. Willie got to the ground... well, being color blind and we had these new chutes, they were called T-10's and they were green with white, or something like that. And I remember technically I guess I was suppose to jump first, but I told Willie, "You go out first..." they were one man sticks, "Willie, you go out first." Because we had these new chutes, the other chutes, the 5-A's or FS... I've forgotten, 5-A's I guess, were orange and yellow, which I could see very nicely on the ground. A lot of times when you jump, you know, the first two or three people out there you can see where they are, you can see how their chute is lying on the ground, which way the wind is blowing, and so on and so on. So there is some advantage, sometimes, to being the second, or third, or the last man out. But anyway, I said, "Willie, you go out first and when you get down there take your chute... your panels and turn the white one up so I can make sure," because it was dark and we were kind of jumping off into the... off a ridge and the shadows and everything. So I remember he did that, but it didn't do any good because I hung up in a tree anyway. And that's when I was jammed up face first against the tree trying to get my reserve off. And I was yelling and screaming and swearing, and that's when Willie yelled up, "Hey! Hey, there's some women down here." So they'd seen us, they were right there. I never saw them from the air, but anyway the rest is history. [laugh] Anyway, it was a big deal, and Willie and I are now in the... we're in the Oral History Project.

Right. Right. That was 1970?

1970, yes. Anything after that has been anticlimactic, obviously.

Anything before that interesting?

Before that?

Yeah.

Not... not... other than the reputation of Squad Six. We, Willie did steal the trophy. Well, I'll have to admit to this. I think Von Bracht did it, but I [laugh] but since he's not here to defend himself. The following year, '69, they had a trophy, maybe they still have it, it was called the New Man Trophy for the best squad every year. And I don't know when it started, we'll say, like, 1960 or something. I don't know if this trophy
still exists, but I remember since we in '68 ended up being the biggest bunch of duds they'd ever trained. When we came back in '69, year in '69, the Squad of the Year from the previous year, '68, had not been engraved on the trophy, so Willie and I took it downtown and we engraved Squad Six for 1968 on there. And, oh, Jesus....

KR And put it back?

WW Put it back in the case. Oh, Christ! When that... [laugh] oh, Jesus.

KR Have you checked on that? Is it still there?

WW Well, I... I guess when I came back in '70 I saw somebody had taken a knife and tried to scratch out... you know, probably was one of the last years they even had that trophy, I guess. We had ruined it. [laugh] Von Bracht... he and I, we had a lot of fun. Burt Tanner who's in the next room being interviewed, we... we never really had a leader in Squad Six, but we certainly had a cheering section.

KR Hmmm. Sounds like it.

WW So I think that's a highlight, too. We took those before.

KR Now, that was 1970?

WW '71 I went to Grangeville.

KR '70, when you had that Grey Wolf jump?

WW It was 1970, yes, in August of 1970. I think the 21, 22, something like that.

KR You have seven more years of jumping.

WW [laugh] Well, the Grey Wolf Fire got around. I remember many times sitting down with other jumpers and, "Hey! Did you ever hear about... the story about the..." you know, and I would listen to their interpretation of the story, and then either I would admit to it, or somebody at the table would say, "Well, that's the guy that was there." Of course the story... I remember a pilot one time (pilots are notorious for stories)... I'll tell you a story about a pilot. Willie and I one day had to... pilot's lie, I mean, jumpers lie, but pilots really lie. They've done everything, or if they do "done it," they've done it a little better, a littler higher, a little faster. I'll never forget, Willie and I one day were supposed to... over at Missoula, we were still here, we were supposed to clean... sweep up, or something. We went into what is called the pilot's room. I remember they were in there just lying to each other. It was just amazing. They... you know, one guy was telling some lie about where he'd flown and about the weather; and some other guy had done it blah-blah-blah better or bigger plane, or something
like that. And I'll never forget, Von Bracht and I were pushing these brooms around, just listening to this stuff and, of course, you know, we could lie with the best of them, too. And [laugh] I'll never forget, Von Bracht kind of, you know, we were just a couple of pogue jumpers and kind of interrupted and said, "Say, has anybody in here ever flown a PM-2B?" Some God-damn pilot, "Yeah, yeah, I got thirty six hours on that." And I... "Shit, Willie, what are you talking about?" I didn't get it. So one of the other pilots said, "Well, what's a..." turned to Willie and said... Von Bracht and said, "Say, what is a PM-2B?" He said, "Power mower, two blades." [laugh] So that's when I learned that pilots sometimes will stretch the truth. That had to be, I guess, in 1970 also, because that was the last time I was in Missoula. All right I don't know all the stories, I can't tell them all, I guess.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

WW ... Stevie Walker, Willie Von Bracht.
KR How'd you hurt your back?
WW How did I hurt my back?
KR Uh-huh. Was that smokejumping?
WW Well, probably, but I'll never admit to it.
KR It's just you and me. It's all right.

WW Oh, no. No, I don't mind, you know. Last Halloween, '83, I finally had a lapendectomy on it. They removed part of a disk, or scraped it or something like that. But no, it was not directly jumper injury. I was proud of myself that I did put in a full days work and I never got hurt. Oh, scratched up, but I worked very hard.

KR Do you think that it wasn't an accumulation of several years?

WW It's everything. I know the last summer that I jumped we had a pack out that I was gonna show them how tough I was, since I was the oldest one on the fire. Probably shouldn't have packed all that... I carried the chain saw, you know. I shouldn't have done that. But I hurt my back early in the summer, actually, in the ocean in the surf down in California fooling around with my son. So... but I did come up and jump anyway and I was very painful all last summer, and it didn't get any better when I got home. But it really wasn't jumper... you know, I didn't fall out of the tree, you know.

KR Was there any difference in Missoula... being based out of Missoula and Grangeville?
Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, I wouldn't never go back to Missoula.

Why?

It's... I mean, Larry Eisenman's great. I mean, he's somebody... I should tell you about the Corn Creek Fire, I guess. [laugh] No. Well...

Sure.

But... yeah, there was one time... there was a fire when I was over in Grangeville and, again, it was kind of a circus deal that... they've always wanted to shut down Grangeville, as I understand it, the Forest Service for some reason. And... but Grangeville has always done a good job and they they always have a lot of fire on the Nez Perce and they are always trying to save a dollar here and a dollar there, you know. They have closed a lot of the bases, but Grangeville is still going. And I remember (I don't know which summer it was... it was one of those summers '72, '74... I don't remember) but there was a fire, I guess it had to be on the Salmon... well it was on the Salmon, yes, and... but it was called Corn Creek, I think. And I remember they had some 'Zoolies over there in Grangeville, because we had all jumped out. For some reason either I hadn't jumped or I just came off a fire and I got mixed up with a group from Missoula, and Larry Eisenman was the foreman and my friend Burt, who also trained with me in Squad Six... Burt Tanner. Anyway, we jumped... eight of us, it was a... McCall had jumped a fire on top of the ridge, and we came by to help, and we jumped down on the bottom. And I remember Eisenman was in charge and I used to have these pants... I used to have a series of different colored pants. That was before everybody is kind of like a clone now, where everybody has a yellow shirt and green pants, or something. The good old days, you could kind of express you individuality, I suppose. And I used to have a different set of pants, the one I remember having dress blacks, they were levis and I'd sewn some letdown rope down the side, looked like a Marine. And I had some others called my weekenders, which were some really clever plaid pants.

And I remember this fire, this Corn Creek, and Larry Eisenman and I... Larry had a good sense of humor. He was a Marine, but a real Marine. I was just in the Reserve, but we used to tease each other about war stories. But anyway, Eisenman was in charge of this fire and I remember we jumped... it was pretty early in the day... in the morning, still and... no, that's not right. We jumped late in the afternoon--4:00, we'll say--and we started cutting line and dinking around and working up this... up towards McCall. And I remember that some nerd came by, we were taking a break, cutting across some rock pile or something, we decided to take a break there. And we... and I remember I... I had the radio for some reason, how in the world I ended up with the radio, I don't know, but this... some nerd came by checking the line or something, he came to the eight of us
just kind of crapped out there for a while and wanted to know, "Who's in charge?" He... you know, you could just tell he was kind of a screwball, you know, so they'd given him a radio, you know, which is the sign of authority on a fire. And we were all tired already, because we knew we were gonna be up... doing it all night. And I'll never forget, this guy came by, "Who's in charge?" And Eisenman, who was kind of further down... although we all kind of putzing around, he was, maybe, twenty yards below me. And Burt and I were up at top of this group, we were up resting, and I had the radio for some reason and (this may not be funny now, but it was certainly funny then) he goes... Larry Eisenman looked up, I remember he has kind of beedy eyes, he looked up and he pointed up at me and he said, "The guy up there in the plaid pants." And I was kind of pooped out and I kind of looked down at Eisenman and this dip-shit yells up, "What's your name?" Well, I was so tired, you know, and I wasn't gonna give him my name, of course, because I wasn't in charge, although I had the radio. And I kind of looked at Eisenman and I couldn't think of his name. My mind was just a blank and I kind of... the guy had asked me what my name was, and I kind of looked at Eisenman and I couldn't think of anything. And this guy kind of like, "What's going on here?" And I... it finally dawned on me, "Larry!" And then he says, "What's your last name?" Well shoot, I couldn't remember that up there at all. It took me thirty seconds to come up with Larry. And I remember Eisenman then yells, "Eisenman!" I said, "Yeah, Larry Eisenman." [laugh] And so this guy started giving me all kinds of directions, what I was supposed to do next, you know. Oh, jeez, anyway that was a classic.

But anyway, we cut line all that night and we could tell the next day was gonna be real hot, and they still haven't caught this fire. There was only eight of us so we went back... we got relieved and went on back down to camp, and, you know, I was really tired. And we were all tired, and I'll never forget, old... we got into camp, I remember getting a paper sleeping bag, I was gonna walk on over... we were all gonna walk on over to have something to eat, and then go to sleep, because we would then be the night crew, I would assume, you see. I'll never forget, old Eisenman he just loved this stuff, he went over to the boss... the camp boss or fire boss and I'll never forget, he talked with him for a minute and I was kind of looking at Larry and I was lying on my sleeping bag with my head kind of up and he came over with this little shit eating grin on his face and he goes... I'll never forget, he took his clapped them together and he goes, "Day crew!" Well, we got right back up and right back on that line. Oh, jeez, I was really dragging. [laugh] But it got hot that day, too. And then that night they did take us off the fire altogether. I don't want to get Eisenman in trouble for this one either, but it was classic because we did work, you know, the two shifts. And we went to Salmon, Idaho, and I remember Bert and I were suppose to share a bed, and I wasn't gonna sleep in the same bed with Bert. Macho, so we took the bed apart. One of us slept on the mattress on the floor, and the other slept on the box spring. The poor maid the next day, probably, "What in the world is going on?" But... yeah, that was
Corn Creek Fire. I don't remember the year.

KR Differences between Grangeville and Missoula?

WW Oh, yeah! Well, it has... [laugh] well, the... just a smaller base. Missoula... you know, it's no fault of Missoula it's just a lot of people there and there's nothing going on, there's a lot of make-work projects. And it's... you know, there could be 100 jumpers, you may be number seventy four. Well, you go to Grangeville, there's only seventeen, so even if you're number seventeen you know everybody. And after I was over in Grangeville, I never got hurt or anything like that, but most of our jumps were made on the Nez Perce. And you'd meet the people out there in the woods, and you would talk to them and two or three years later, you know, you might be on a fire out there and they knew that Woolworth was on this fire. Not that... like I say, I never got hurt, but it was always, you know, you knew... the person you were talking to on the radio knew you. And you jump out of Missoula, there's no telling where you might be. They didn't care, I mean, you know, eight of you out there, or four of you, or two of you. You were just a name or number. So I always felt confident... I had more confidence if anything ever happened. And sometimes things did happen. Bob Dettmann broke his leg... er, he didn't really break his leg, I guess, he injured his leg and he was kind... he was our resident hippie one year. And [laugh]

KR What was his name again?

WW Bob Dettmann, D-E-T-T-M-A-N. But he jumped over... he was jumping Missoula then. He saw what the good deal we had over in Grangeville. If I remember... in the middle of the summer he transferred over, I guess they needed somebody and he was kind of a hippie, you know, he had long hair. And I'll never forget, he jumped there two or three years there, I think. But there was a gentleman over there by the name of Arizona, who stuttered a lot, and he was kind of like... I don't know, F.C.O., or something on one of the little districts there and I remember, eight of us jumped this fire over there. And Dettmann, we thought, had broken his leg. I think he landed on a stump or something. So... and so they brought a 'copter out to get him off and I remember Arizona was in the... and you're not supposed to mention their names over the radio, OK. If someones hurt, so you don't start rumors, but we knew Arizona, and, of course, he knew all of us and I'll never forget, I... Dpeice... Phil Dpeice was in charge and he says something about... over the radio that the hippie had been hurt. Of course, everybody knew who that was and Arizona... Arizona's comment, he kind of stuttered, was, "C-c-cut his hair off." [laugh] That was his... and, as I say, this was the early '70's and that was before the California influence had moved to Idaho and Montana. But it was that kind of feeling, you know. And we had a lot of parties over... you could have a jumper party, you could invite a lot of people over from the town and they would come out, you know. The jumpers... not that we were an institution, but, you know, you could walk downtown and
people would know you. And, of course, working for Homer Courville and Neil Walstad--easy Homer, easy Neil--but they were very good people to work for. Again, there's very good people over here in Missoula, but just because of the number of people. Homer and Neil were very good for my personality, we got along just great. And, you know, everyone's a little different, some people have to be told what to do every single day. Some people, you know, give you... they can be left alone and still do the job. I suppose I'm in the latter category and I... you could carve your own little niche if you wish. I'm not saying that there were seventeen screwballs or individuals over there, but that was one of the major advantages of being in Grangeville.

KR Do you see yourself as a screwball?

WW Oh, no. Oh, no. No, I'm not a screwball at all. [laugh]

KR What kind of guy is it that goes for smokejumping?

WW Screwballs. [laugh]

KR Is it what you thought it would be?

WW Oh, it's much better than I thought it would be. Much better. I... it's the best job I've ever had. I... people always ask me, "Why do you do it?" Especially when I was teaching, you know. I mean, you know, when I was thirty I was even in my forties and I was still going back. And people would just... they didn't understand it. And it... you just can't explain it, I suppose. It's the people. It's the people you work with, they know... take... take any 100 anything, you know, doctors, teachers, winos, you would find some you wouldn't like but, you know, you take any 100 jumpers, and, you know, they would do anything for you. They could certainly put in a day's work and that's part of the job. You don't find 100 anything that would put in a day's work and not complain.

KR What...

WW Go ahead.

KR No.

WW I was just going to say, that's... that's really unique. That's something that you don't find in a classroom, you don't find... I have a business, you don't find it in the business world, and you don't... I've never found it any place that you could take such a cross-section of America. Well, you'd find it in, you know, in a certain... probably in the airborne, probably some elements of it in the Marine Corps, I'm sure. But the comradery, of course and the ability to work until the job is done. If you got paid, fine; if you got a bad deal, that's fine; if you got a good deal, that's fine; it didn't really matter. You got the job done.
KR: What was your relationship with the ground crew? How do you see ground crews?

WW: Well, as I said, I had this experience with this hot-shot crew in Southern California, and that was a real eye opener. I mean, there was a... be something you did, quite a job. Any hot-shot or I.R. crew from Southern California, certainly is right up there with the jumpers, as far as their ability to do a day's work, as far as to understand fire behavior.

KR: Well, when you were jumping around here, out of Grangeville and you had a ground crew come in...?

WW: Yeah, now up here, that's... yeah. I remember one time (that's another story) which made me feel quite... six of us, we didn't jump the fire. It was down there by Riggins someplace. I remember, Homer Courville... Homer, Gary Go, Dettmann, and I, a kid named of Dpeice... Dpeice was on it and a kid named Claire Olson. There was six of us, we got in what they call the "Green Doug," which was simply a school bus. We drove down this fire that somebody had set off the road someplace. And when we got there... it took us, you know, an hour to drive down there and it was really late in the afternoon, if not dark, when we got down there. And there was only six of us, OK, and I'll never forget, when we got to the fire, you could see... it was no... it was like grass and trees, scattered timber and stuff. It wasn't a real gobbler, but night was coming on, but I'll never forget... I don't remember the name of the fire at all, but I'll never forget, six of us... but Homer was in charge, of course, he had us... we were suppose to go someplace, so we started walking up a partially dug line on one of it's flanks and we had only gone about, maybe, I don't know, thirty yards, it seemed to me, and here was this whole crew crapped out, and they had cut this line. And then we went out maybe another thirty or sixty yards, here was another crew. I mean, these are about twenty five men. So there's about fifty men, and they were crapped out, too. They hadn't very far. Well, shoot, you know, we kind of looked at each other, the six of us, and said, "Well, gosh, we're not gonna follow this crew. It will take us all week to put this fire out." So I think that's what we were suppose to do. I think we were supposed to fill in, you know, or be with these. We said, "Screw it!" Homer said, "Screw it!" So we got in front and we just took off. We just spread through that, and we worked all night. And I remember we did get... we didn't get all the way around it, but we got around to the top, and we cut a lot of line, the six of us. And we never did see those... those crews never did catch up to us. And, you know, that's... that's... as I say, we didn't put the fire out we were only on there one night, but we did get around to the top and we tied in to some rocks or something and I guess that's what we were suppose to do. But I thought that was amazing: six of us cut more line than these other fifty. Never did see them, and all they had to do is drag their tools behind us. But did you ask me... that was one experience with the ground crew.
KR Is that generally how you feel about ground crews?

WW Well, not the... as I say, the crews in Southern California.

KR No, not them.

WW And the I.R. crews up here, I mean, those Slate Creek I.R., sure they can do a good job. And that's where all the jumpers are generally supposed to be, from I.R. crews. Well, no, we're all in the same boat, you know. The jumpers are first on, first off, you know, with a fire, generally speaking, we're the first ones there unless it's right off the road or something. Then, of course, since you're highly trained they'll take you someplace else. And the other thing is, you know, you have been on the ground and you have... and you know about fire behavior, that's the prerequisite, it's supposed to be for to get in it. So I don't think there's no real competition. I think there's a lot of competition between the ground crews, but I don't think... the smokejumpers, I don't think, are aware of any competition with another ground crew.

KR So you... in '83, you were around when women were jumping?

WW Yes. Yes, Marty (I can't remember her last name. Marty something)

KR Did you jump with her?

WW We trained together. Well, last summer when I came back for refresher, there was a jumper named Marty, a woman, who I had met the previous summer in California in Redding. My son and I were on a Boy Scout canoe trip, this was in '82. And I had no visions, really of going back jumping, but it was in Northern California on the Klamath River on a canoe trip in August, and when we came back from the canoe trip, I don't know, there were twenty scouts and a bunch of dads, and I said, "Listen, why don't we go by the jump base in Redding and, you know, I'll take you on a little tour there." Although, you know, there was nothing scheduled. Well, when we pulled in there, some 'Zoolies had just arrived, Sears... Jim Sears, and Terry Williamson, and some other that I didn't know and this woman--Marty (I wish I could think of her last name now. I can't think of her last name.) That was in '82, and that's when I... I didn't really know that they had trained some women. But anyway, then... this was almost like going back to '67 when I first came to Missoula and said, "Hey, next year I have to do it." '68 and then kind of in '82 I came to Redding there and saw Sears and Williamson so maybe I can get back on. So anyway... so I did meet Marty there and then last summer when I came back to refresh for one week in June in Missoula, I met Marty and I... she did remember me because I had her talk to these little Boy Scouts about... because it was pretty unique, and I tried to impress on these little Boy Scouts that, "We were now going to have a little talk from a very unique person, the first woman smokejumper." Which probably didn't mean a think to them, but...
KR What does it mean to you?

WW Well, I'm all in favor of E.R.A. [Equal Rights Amendment]. It's... you know, I have a daughter that's twenty, so [laugh] she's not gonna be a smokejumper, but, you know, she could certainly be the President of the United States. No, I mean, it's... sure it's macho, but no big deal.

KR Do you remember your last jump?

WW My last jump? Oh, yeah. I remember both jumps, because last year I only got two fire jumps. And... oh, yeah, the last one, actually, was the one we jumped on... oh, I don't remember the name of the fire, but it was not summer and I was the... they jumped two of us. I don't know, the Twin Otter at Grangeville somehow gets jacked around a little bit. The Twin Otter was someplace else, ferrying ground troops, as you say, to some other fire and we had a little fire out there and we had a little Cessna, or something, that could only take two jumpers at a time, so this other kid and I, his name is... oh, jeez, I can't forget his name already, it's on the tip... he and I jumped first and the little Cessna went back, got two more, and came out, went back and got two more, ended up with eight of them finally on the fire. But that... we were supposed to cut a helispot and it was... we... it was a very... there was some real low brush there, we could cut it out quickly and it would have grown back very quickly, you know. You don't want too cut too many helispots, because that means you, you know, they'll helitac the fires next time. So, you know, it would have grown back in a year or two. But the gentleman that was in charge of the fire, he was... true, you could see Moose Creek right down there, you know, but that's a very bad omen when your on a fire... on a ridge top and you can see the river. Well, "It's just right down there." You know, "It can't be very far, it's only that far on the map." You know—about a half an inch on the map, but it isn't half an inch to walk it. But anyway, that fire were supposed to... at least our gear, at a minimum, was going to be 'coptered off. But anyway, somebody decided we were gonna walk off, which, you know, it pays the same. It didn't bother me. But I wasn't... my back had been hurting anyway, so yes, I do remember my last fire because since I was the oldest one there, even though I wasn't in charge of anything, I said, "Hey! Give me the chain saw." I think we had two chain saws, at least... no, we had one, I guess, eight of us, we had one chain saw. I said, "I'll take that son of a gun." So I threw that on my pack too, and boy... [laugh] You know, these other guys, you know, they just... but four of us went off first, we got a head start and we had most of the gear. We had spurs... trying to think of this kid that I jumped with, he had to carry the spurs. "Sizzler!" We called him... I called him "Sizzler." His name... it was Doug... he's still jumping over there, I think, this year. Doug Sizz—something, but we all called him "Sizzler" or Sizz. Simler! Simler, that's him name, Doug Simler. I always called him "Sizzler." "Sizzler" had the spurs because he hung up, and I
took the chain saw because I thought I'd be tough. And boy, what a steep walk that was. You're right, you could see the river down there, but holy cow! The four of us went off first and the other four guys caught me and passed me. I mean, that... it rained on us about the last hour, I mean, we just got drenched. Boy! "Hey, I'll carry the chain saw." I just said, "No you won't." [laugh] What a fool. It took about, I don't know, five hours to get off that thing. I was beat, my back was killing me. So yes, I do remember my last... I have a plaque from my last fire in '79, which was supposed to be my last fire. I mean, I even had... Norm Kamrud was the spotter, he and Terry Williamson were the spotters in the plane. I knew it was going to be my last fire in '79 so "Kid" (can't think of his name) Johnson, or something like that, he was from Missoula, but he was over in Grangeville for some reason. '79... we were the center of the universe in '79. Boy, we had fires up the ying-yang out of Grangeville. And... I think it was '79, or '76, I don't remember which year, '79, I guess. But I remember this kid, he and I jumped a fire on Moose Creek and he hurt his ankle, and we jumped down on the bottom. Fire was on the bottom, there was a little spot down on the bottom, so we jumped down on the bottom. Our cargo came down to the bottom, but we were supposed to walk up to the top of the ridge and then down the ridge to Moose Creek. I mean, it was an all day walk, but I never forget, he had hurt his ankle not... and, again, it was another one of these late afternoon deals. And so we cut the snag down, I remember, and we slept all night there. Of course, the next morning it was time to leave, and he couldn't walk very well. I can't remember his name, though, and I knew it was my last fire and it's really the first time I'd been with just somebody else other than... partially hurt anyway, I said, "Shoot!" I was supposed to be in charge, and so... I'm not a real horse, you know, so... I can't think of this kid's name. But anyway, he couldn't carry all of his gear, of course, and I had all my gear, and we had to go to the top of this ridge. Oh, jeez, you know, I remember taking all of my crap up first, turning around... he could walk, but he... I guess he carried, like, his P.G. bag or something, and then I had to go back down and get all his crap and pick it up. So I think by the time I made the two trips, he was up to the top. Well, then we had to walk all the way down with all this crap. So, by then I think I got a 'copter up, but I was embarrassed, you know, this was supposed to be my last fire. "Hey! That Woolworth is really milking this. He wants a 'copter ride out of his last one." But I... you know, I kind of figured that if he was really hurt, and we walked off, you know, I could be in trouble. "You idiot, why did you do that?" And if he wasn't hurt and I 'coptered him off then, "You idiot," you know, "he's playing volley ball," you know. [laugh] But since it wasn't my ankle. But anyway we did get... yes, I remember that.

KR We had a fire on the hill yesterday.

WW [laugh] It had to be the jumpers that started that one.

KR What went through you when you saw that smoke?
WW I'm glad I'm not out there. [laugh] No, I... of course, that was an easy one, you could tell it was gonna go right to the top, but... and stop. But no, I... I certainly don't... you know, there's no fun, you know, the snot running out your nose and tears in your eyes and you can't breath and, you know, you've been walking all day. You know, it's hard, dirty work sometimes and there's... so I don't miss that part of it. Although, on the other hand, you know, it's... when I'm eighty-six in the old folks home I know I could... at one day could do a day's work. And...

KR Do you want to jump again?

WW Oh, I would. Yeah, if I... if I hadn't hurt my back, if I... I certainly would, sure. I mean, I don't tell anybody that. I got a very good excuse not to. But I'm not going to chance it. You know, I'll go on certainly, I got a lot of sympathy the first time, but if I came back and did this and hurt myself, I would be... but I want to emphasize that I didn't hurt my back by jumping.

KR How many jumps did you make, total in your career?

WW Just... 102, or 103... 101, something like that. I know last... I... that's probably the other reason I came back last year was to get my 100th jump in. And I think I got it on one of my two fires. So I think I have, like, 102 jumps. My daughter came up last summer, too. But she... maybe I've already mentioned it, she's a sophomore... she just finished her sophomore year at Utah State. She came up last summer. I wasn't... I knew I couldn't... I knew I wasn't feeling very well with my back, but she came up for three or four days, and we went on a float trip with some of the jumpers, and she fell in love with all of them, of course. And I'm supposed to see some of them this weekend. I haven't yet. But Evette, you're in the history, now. [laugh] Yeah, she's... it's, of course, that she's twenty now. She sees me a lot differently than when she was ten. She... of course, I kid her, "That's how I use to look, Evette." [inaudible] [laugh] She's in love with Gene Minic (?) Oh, jeez, I'm getting into real trouble. Minic, he jumps over in Grangeville. He's a nice kid. He's a student here in Missoula, I think. But he's a real nice guy. She's not in love with him. [laugh] If I'm gonna get her in trouble, I might as well go all the way, huh? My son's seventeen, eighteen in January. He's always... we've both toyed with the idea that it would be great to be... I'm sure it would be the first father... active father/son team. And he still talks about it a little bit. But... yeah, he's eighteen, probably be a jumper within the next four or five years. I'd would only be late forties.

KR Not unheard of.

WW Sure. I don't know if there's any active. I know there's been fathers and then their sons have jumped later on, but I
don't think together.

KR No. I mean, I say that I've heard of jumping in your late forties.

WW So it... but, again, I'm not gonna go through the back thing just to [laugh] make history.

KR Do you think he's gonna jump, your son?

WW Well, I don't know. I'd be really interesting to see if he did, I probably would come back. Not to, you know, babysit him but for the glory of it. [laugh] Go from Grey Wolf to first father/son.

KR I don't know if I've asked the right questions, or asked questions you want to talk about?

WW I don't ever give the right answers anyway. [laugh]

KR Is there something that you want to talk about that you'd like to have on this tape about smokejumping? Your experiences with it, what it meant to you?

WW It's... I've thought about that a little bit. I suppose it's like being an astronaut, in a sense; or being a conquistadore; or, you know, when you read history, of being an ancient Greek, being one of the Pythagorians or something. When you... in history... when you read history, you know, eventually the jumpers won't be, just because there aren't crusades anymore. The Crusaders are gone; the Pythagorians are gone; or whatever it might be. You know, I would love to be able to go back and meet Pythagorus the mathematician. I'd love to be able go to Athens, or the Renaissance, Christ. You know, there's certain history... times in history and it would be the same thing, you know, if they never had another astronaut, if they never go to the moon again, what a shame that you were born either too early or too late. And the same with the jumpers. It's...

KR It was something in your life that you take with you every year, that influences you. That you don't ever forget. It's real important to you. Do you think that it's influenced things that you've done? You know... I know you only jumped last year. But you took some years off there, you went into teaching, how did it influence stuff that you've done other than smokejumping?

WW Well, I know it's made me a better teacher in the sense that I would... I would, you know... I taught Junior High a lot and I remember one kid, Jim Bestigo, this... I don't know how many years ago this was, a long time ago, he was in my algebra class. I'll never forget, at the end of the year he... he was... he came up to me, because I guess towards the end of the year I used to always show this movie called Fire Named Jeremiah, or if I couldn't get the movie, I'd show them some of my slides. I always did that at the end of the year and that would kind of
dazzle some of the kids that... kids, you know, look at teachers as kind of like monks living in classrooms. If they see you downtown, "What are you doing here?" You know, like, you're suppose to be... don't eat food, don't go to Safeways or nothing. But I remember old Jim Bestigo, this kid that I taught, came up to me one year and said, "You know, Mr. Woolworth I think it's really neat that you do that during the summer." I mean, I always thought that, you know, one of my ex-students would be a jumper, but it never happened. So, it made teaching easier in the sense that you weren't... you were unique. You may not... [laugh] I was going to say, "You may not be a very good teacher." But that's not... and, you know, in addition to teaching... teaching mathematics, which is what I teach, teaching mathematics, you know, the mathematics itself doesn't take too much talent, but teaching of mathematics is a whole new ballgame. And you never know what's going to impress a student. Sometimes it's the math, sometimes it's the teacher, you would hope it's a combination of the two. And I always like to think that my personality and the experiences I had enriched those students. They could have had some other math teacher to learn the math, but hopefully... I never told them stories especially, like I'm telling you. I think that it was a help teaching in that sense, because sometimes teachers, you know, are kind of one sided. You know, they only know subjects and sometimes they don't know the real world. They may have spent their whole life in college, they forget about manuel labor. Not everyone's gonna go to college, not everyone is going to enjoy mathematics. Some people are going to end up digging ditches or what all, and you tend to have an appreciation (at least I do) of... for doing a days work, whether it's intellectual, or physical, or emotional.

KR Smokejumpers are family to you?

WW Oh, yeah. Yeah. Oh, yeah. [laugh]

KR Is there gonna be anything that can come close to that? You gonna look for something for that adrenalin rush, that closeness with other people that you've gotten from the smokejumpers?

WW Well, like I said, if I hadn't hurt my back.

KR You'd still be there? Thank you. Thank you for your time and thank you for your sharing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]