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RF This is Roxi Farwell with the Smokejumpers Oral History Project, I'm interviewing Mr. Kenn Smith and we're at the University of Montana Anthropology Department. It's July 21, 1984 and it's around 4:00 P.M.

RF Well can you tell me when you were born?


RF Well happy birthday! [laughs]

KS Yeah, you bet. [laughs] In Colville, Idaho.

RF O.K. And can you kind of outline your background before you became a smokejumper?

KS Well I grew up on a farm in Idaho and, was a farmer's kid, worked on the farm all those years until I graduated from high school at Colville, and then shortly after I graduated from high school I went into the Air Force. It was during the Korean War, and I was in just about two years and I got out. My father was quite ill so I got an early out to help him farm. And they finally sold the farm (thank heavens) so I was always kind of interested in jumping. I was rescue and survival instructor in the Air Force and so when I got out I thought I'd like to take a shot at smokejumping so in '55 I did take a shot at it.

RF So had you had any previous contact with parachuting or smokejumping or...?

KS Oh, some, yeah, ah huh, but not to get me into what I got into with the Forest Service.

RF Uh huh.

KS You really learned more, you know, the basic things, with the Forest Service than you did any place else.

RF Did you have any previous fire fighting experience?

KS No, none at all except maybe out in the hay field or wheat field [laughs]. No, I didn't know anything about fighting fire, and in them days, you know, it isn't like today they have to have several years of fire fighting experience. In them days your best chance of getting hired was to go and get a personal interview. They hired us folks in Idaho at McCall, Idaho, and if they got a look at you and talked to you they were pretty prone to hiring people, kids... that had grown up on a farm, and been exposed to manual labor, and hand tools, and farm animals, and horses, and tractors, anything, you know, that... the hardest work that you do with your hands, they were quite interested in that. In them days like I say you didn't have to have the fire
experience; they taught you. So I applied the winter of '54 and then, well, I guess it was in '55, January of '55, and I went to work in June of '55.

RF Um, what was your impression of smokejumping before you became a smokejumper?

KS Well, you know, I really... I wanted to fight fire basically but I thought there would be a little more glory and a little more money if you were jumping. And I really wasn't impressed... I seen the movie... and I really... you know, I really didn't think about that. I don't know... I don't know why I just chose that I'm very happy I did because....

RF Was....

KS Go ahead.

RF Was it better pay than if you were a ground crew fireman?

KS Yeah, it was. In them days I think we started out at $1.85 an hour and the ground crew was probably getting $1.60 so it [laughs] wasn't that much.

RF [laughs] So, ah, you were single then when you started?

KS Yes, yes, and I'm still a bachelor [laughs].

RF [laughs] Parachuting does that to you sometimes.

KS [laughs] Yeah, yeah [laughs].

RF What did your family think of you jumping out of planes?

KS Well at first they weren't too... too hot on the idea. They thought it was pretty dangerous, and they just kind of more or less... the longer I was with it the more they just assumed, well, he knows what he's doing I guess. I know in later years my dad got really exposed to the jumpers and what we did and all that and he often told me before he died that that would really be he thought a great job, he wished he could have had the opportunity to do that. So they mellowed out with the fear, you know. I always told them that jumping ain't going to kill you; some of those man made air machines would get you but... [laughs].

RF [laughs] So then you trained at McCall?

KS McCall, yes. The Idaho City people were trained at McCall, we trained together there, and then after training was over why the crew would move down to Idaho City which is north of Boise.

RF What was involved in training?

KS Oh, the usual... a lot of emphasis on first aid; a lot of
emphasis on the physical training, the units like the jump tower and the let downs... the let downs that you need to training which you need to get down out of the trees, physical fitness, the physical buildup, but real emphasis on safety, constantly safety, everything you did which in a job like that is really important because you depend on each person to be alert and look for anything that may cause problems to anybody. And then fire training, very thorough fire training... how to build fire line, your fuels, fire weather, you name it... classroom work on that, and then in the field, a lot of field work on training. But really a lot of emphasis on the actual training of the smokejumper itself on the units, and the conduct in the airplane, in the sky after your chutes open, how to be prepared if your chute doesn't open, what to look for and all that, very thorough.

RF [Did you] feel ready for that first jump, that first practice jump when it came up?

KS Yup, I felt the trainers were very confident in what they were telling you and I think most everybody's ready.

RF About how long did that training take?

KS Ah, about four weeks all together. There was a little stall in there because of weather where we couldn't do stuff, but I think over all it took almost a month to complete it. I think they have it down to three weeks now because there's a lot of elimination now of the fire training because everybody they get now has been formalized in fire training and then a lot of us had never been on a fire in our lives.

RF How'd you feel when you were getting into the plane for that very first practice jump?

KS I was scared to death [laughs] and everybody should be or they don't belong on a job like that. They're nuts if they're not scared I'll tell you that. I trained the new jumpers for years at McCall and I told them if they weren't scared we didn't want them around because they had to be some kind of an idiot [laughs].

RF [laughs] Well they still made that first step right.

KS [laughs] Oh, yeah. The old thing, you know, they'd just drop one man sticks out of those... we were using the Travelaire, a single engine overhead aircraft, old timer 30's, and the Ford Tri-motor and they would jump one guy at a time and you always wondered what happened to that guy just ahead of you, just step out the door and he disappeared, you know [laughs], swoosh and he was gone.

RF Did you lose that fear after the first jump or did it...?

KS I think you had it until the fourth or fifth one, you really... [laughs] but you really got your brains together and
RF  Any of those practice jumps stick out in your mind?

KS  Yeah, my sixth one. I had a very bad malfunction and we were jumping out of the Ford and the pilot... he's dead now, he's a Missoula pilot... flying out of McCall he was flying for Johnson's. But for some reason he didn't want to get that thing up in the air very high... we were jumping about 700 feet. And I had a Mae West, ah, it's a partial inversion type thing and... and I fought that thing trying... trying to get to the ground. Well by the time I got ready to pull my reserve I knew I couldn't do nothing with it, I was really sailing down and I was already in the lodgepoles, breaking the tops out of trees, but I lucked out and came in all right. I missed the spot. But then the next day we jumped a practice fire jump and it was a... a lot of thinking going on in my mind, you know. And I had a good spotter, Wayne Webb... I'm sure he's been interviewed... and he was telling me just where he wanted me to land and while I was milling it over in my mind he pushed me out the door [laughs]. So that was that.

RF  [laughs] He thought you were thinking awful hard.

KS  Yeah, yeah, I was thinking too much [laughs].

RF  Ah, what was your impression during that first training of your foremen and your instructors and spotters and...?

KS  Well for the most part I thought they were very prominent people and good attitudes really.

RF  Ah, was the training really militaristic or did you feel like it was pretty laid back?

KS  It was pretty laid back I thought after being at Ft. Benning, Georgia, you know, I thought it was laid back and personal. They could see certain folks were having problems with this part of the training or that part of the training and they would spend particular time with that person trying to help them out where in the military with masses they don't do that. If somebody's having a bad time they worked on them until they leave, but in this case it was pretty much that they were there to help you, if they could see that the person was going to make a good candidate for a jumper and a fire fighter, basically a fire fighter, it was just [that] we had a different method of transportation getting to the fire... but if they could see that there was a potential there of a good fire fighter they would spend the extra time, go the extra mile to get him through.

RF  How critical do you think it was, since you were a foreman, to have that personal contact with your crew? Let's say someone came in that they didn't know, on a fire, that was to be their fire boss or their crew chief?
KS Well, there is a feeling of closeness in these organizations and respect for their foreman and their squad leaders and, you know, if they put somebody in let's say a non-jumper, or some jumper from some other area that they didn't know as their foreman there would be resentment, some resentment, because they knew how their foreman did things and what he expected of them and the breaks he gave them if they did their job, and definitely... that's true. Each organization, (I don't know about Missoula because it was so large), but your smaller groups in the 20, 30 size man jumper units was very personal and close.

RF And so, a lot of cooperation.

KS You bet, you bet.

RF Did that extend over into the project work that you guys did?

KS Yes, yes, the same respect was there.

RF Yeah, something I heard was a problem with Region I was that it was so large, that, I guess you got so detached from, you know, the forest when you were doing the project work and all, that they had some problems with that.

KS Yeah, yeah, I can see that and I trained up here four different springs on my way to New Mexico to jump with the early crew down there and the guys the from Region I from Missoula that I'd worked with the year before down there... they'd probably jumped here three or four years... well when I'd come back the next spring and they may not be around I'd ask "hey, how about old so and so, where's he?" And they'd been here three or four years and there was so many of them they didn't even know who I was talking about. And I felt sorry for the guys because it wasn't that close, personal thing that the other smaller units had.

RF Yeah, how was your relationship with the forest personnel? Like when you were working on projects, or you were working on fires with ground crews, and what have you, did the smokejumpers have a good rapport with...?

KS Sometimes and sometimes not. It seemed like somewhere along the line with jumpers in a certain district on a certain forest we'd get off on the wrong foot and they would be hesitant to use jumpers on fires. But if they did, and you knew that there was this conflict, or whatever, you'd try your best to improve it, you know, with your crew or whatever. But it seemed like there was some of those professional foresters, or district forest fire control people, that had resentment towards the jumpers because maybe they were... maybe glorified or something... I don't know. But I always tried with my crews to try to improve relationships with these districts in these different forests. We had really good relationship with the Boise and the Sawtooth and the Challis National Forest. We covered those areas out of Idaho City. And
we had a few ranger districts that we had problems with, but I spent a lot of time in the winters after fire season PR-ing with these people trying to see what our problems were and trying to, you know... we're all working for the same people and we're all looking after the same forest, the same watershed, and we want to save it. I did spend a lot of time PR-ing and trying to correct things and I did that with my people too. And I... I know the boys here in R-One had problems with different forests and different rangers districts just like everyone did. It was all over. The... the greatest forest to ever work on fighting fire if you loved to fight fire and just keep at it and keep at it was the Gila in Region III. That fire staff man down there, his name was Joey Baldwin, and he made it very clear to his people down there when them jumpers came there they were to fight fire, and they'll put them out, and they'll get them knocked down, but you go watch them and get them guys back because I want to use them again tomorrow, because we're going to have more fires tomorrow. And they did, day after day after day down there and he had the right attitude, and the forest had the right attitude. They really utilized them. And the amazing part to me is that when the budgets is set up, now like over in Region IV where I'm from the regional office is in Ogden, Utah. Well that smokejumper money is taken off the top when it comes to Ogden before the forests get any of their money. Well, these forests have already paid into the smokejumper fund so why don't they use them? I mean the idea is to use the tools they've paid for. But some of them were stand-offish and hold back and resentful I think.

RF Um huh, yeah, huh. When were you down in New Mexico?

KS I jumped down there in '56, '57, '58, and '59.

RF Oh, '55 you were in Idaho?

KS Idaho City, yeah.

RF And then after '59 where were you?

KS At Idaho City, yeah, I stayed there and well, I think about 1960 I became in charge of the new man training at McCall. Well no, it was later than that, it was about '62 or 63. Then I did that every year until '69 and I got hurt in the fall of '69.

RF Uh huh, when did you become a foreman?

KS Oh, about, let's see... I became a squad leader in '58 or '59 and then they created a foremanships job at Idaho City because we didn't have that many people. Smokey Stover was the foreman, the overall foreman, and then about '65 they made me project and training foreman.

RF And then so you were spotting when you were a squad leader or when you were...

KS Yeah, I was spotting when I was a squad leader, in fact I
was spotting in New Mexico in '58 or '59, my third or fourth year. You know, with spotting goes the righteous opportunity to pack parachutes.

RF You have to do both, huh.

KS You have to do both. Well, you know, you'd have to be around, you know, you had to be a squad leader or you just didn't touch them parachutes, of course everybody wanted. But now I guess it's different I guess guys are packing chutes their second year and stuff. No it used to be kind of a prestigious thing, you know, you can be squad leader you can pack chutes [laughs].

RF You had to pack chutes for everybody though?

KS Yeah, yeah....

RF ... on the cargo ships and....

KS Yeah, right, right, right.

RF Did that ever keep you from a jump?

KS Yeah, it did, trying to catch up when I was a foreman or a squad leader, catching up to the stock of packed chutes so the rest of the guys could keep going. Yeah, I missed a lot of jumps doing that.

RF Well, was it kind of frustrating?

KS Yes, it was because those jumps were holy [laughs].

RF More fun than packing those [inaudible] [laughs]....

KS More fun than packing in that damned loft [laughs]. I wasn't a loft lizard, I hated it in there.

RF Loft lizard, is that what you call it?

KS Uh huh, a lot of people just loved to hang around the parachute loft. I got enough of that in the winter sewing up and patching them damned things, I didn't like it in the summer being in there. I liked to be out keeping the guys busy working.

RF Yeah, well the overtime is out on the fire isn't it?

KS Oh, yeah, that's where it is, yeah.

RF Not in the parachute loft.

KS Uh huh.

RF How was spotting, was that a special activity?

KS At times yes. It's a big worry, it's a big responsibility.
Ah, you know, you lived here a long time in this area and you've flown probably over these mountains and you just mythically look straight down out of that airplane door and fantasize a fire down there and say "well where would I put some men, and what if the wind's blowing, and what if this, and what if that." You know, it's a real responsibility and if a spotter isn't concerned he shouldn't be a spotter because you really have to be concerned. And you get so you know your men. Now this was a good part about a smaller group, you knew what they were going to do when they jumped out. You knew what the assent of that parachute was and you could watch them and you knew exactly... When you dropped them you'd tell them how you'd wanted them to get into the spot and you didn't worry about them. There was other guys that you'd tell them this and they'd do the opposite thing though. You just had to prepare yourself for it, you know. But I felt very responsible, you got some guys lives at stake there.

RF Must be really hard to do with the air pattern and everything around the fire and the mountains and....

KS Yeah, it... I... there was lots of real scary moments doing that, and lots of concern that you put your people in jeopardy. And I almost did once on a fire on the Challis. It was no fire at all, it was down, way down on a steep slope of alpine, fir, and lodgepole and not doing anything. And I got... [sighs] I think I got two guys out on this ridge, way at the top of it, a bare ridge, and I was checking the other guy... you have to go over each guy before you get him in that door and make sure everything's perfect. The pilot turned around and said "do you want to put him in the same place?" And I said "yeah", and he said "you better look out there." Well that damn fire had made a run and was clear up the top of the hill where those two guys landed. So this really... there's lots of times that it just really sickens you, the... the worry, you know, something like that happen to you. They were all right. Of course it happened to me too; I had to just snap my parachute and fall out of a tree because it came and burned my gear right in the damn tree. But I don't blame the spotter for it, it's just something you don't know is going to happen. You try to plan for the damn worst when you're doing this. We had a plane crash down by Mountain Home, Air Force plane, and started a fire. It's kind of sub-desert, sub-yellow pine country and honest to God you get involved with the military... They had helicopters flying in and under us. I was trying to drop these jumpers. Newspaper [people] they were flying in and under us, [and] the air tankers... and I finally just called into this... You know, it's frustrating. You had guys in mid-air and planes flying around them. And I just said "we're aborting the whole damn thing." You just... you can't handle that.

RF Yeah, did you get any repercussions for doing that?

KS No, no, they leave it... if they know you've been around long enough they respect your decisions and safety is the main thing. To hell with how much fire burns, the first thing is to
be concerned about the people.

RF Well that's a phenomenal record really when you consider the terrain that you guys were jumping in and everything, and change the injury rate that you could have and all... it's just... I'm amazed.

KS I know one thing there's a hell of a lot of luck in it. But there was a lot of training. But when you look back you don't know where that... That margin of disaster isn't painted in the sky out there. I mean you really don't know how close some of it was.

RF Yeah. How many fires did you jump?

KS Oh, golly, I can't remember. I added up the last jump I made for the Forest Service was 199 and I think probably I had 150 fires jumped. Of course pounded a lot, walked a lot of fires, and we used the guys both ways if at the bottom of the jump list if there was some fires that we could truck them to and get them there faster then, you know, we'd do that too, and copter men or whatever.

RF Do you remember your first fire?

KS Yeah, it's amazing, this is on Smith Creek... it was on Smith Creek, yeah, I remember it. I hit so hard it cracked my helmet [laughs] I hit on the ground, cracked the back of my helmet [laughs], you know, dummy didn't know what I was doing. But the ironic part of it is that my last jump was on another Smith Creek.

RF Um, completion.

KS Yeah, Smith on Smith Creek and ended on Smith Creek.

RF Do you remember anything about that first fire or just... after you took off your broken helmet?

KS Yeah, yeah, I sure do, it was just a snag. It was a live tree that lightning had it and it broke it off in the air about, oh, 15, 16, 18 feet up there. And, of course, I was the new guy and the new guy does all the dirty work. So there was very little ground fire around the tree, probably, you know, maybe just, oh, of line, there was probably 20 feet of line we had to build around the base of the tree and it was all burned up and out. So I climbed the tree and used my let down rope and the guy that was with me, of course, he was an old man, you know, and he had to do all the dirty work. So I took a rope up and he tied a little sack to it (we had climbers came in) and he'd fill it full of dirt and I'd pull it up the tree. And we put this fire out because it was a green tree right up here in the top, it was just busted off and smoldering. Well down in Idaho City when we got done with the fire we carried a bag of mixed mountain grass seed and we'd reseed the fire after we got it out, you know, before we
left. Well I can remember planting the top of this tree with grass seed, that's what I remember about the first fire [laughs].

RF [laughs] It would be interesting for some forestry student or someone....

KS ... have long grass coming out of the top of this tree.

RF What was the, ah, most difficult fire that you got to work on?

KS There was so many. I suppose that same year, it was called Rolley Creek down south of Idaho City. I didn't jump on it, we sent the jumper plane down there but it was close enough that we could get there. And just seemed like everything you tried to do to stop that thing it was just... it was the forest against you that everything went wrong, you know, nothing worked right and the thing went to... finally when it was out it went to 14,000 acres. But there was a stretch, a thicket of white fir, and it was so hot, but we were trying to get this line from going into that white fir. And we came within about six, eight feet of this and we just... it was just cooking us. Well it got into the white fir, and it crowned out, and it spotted all over the country, and that's when it went. And it was heart breaking to see that happen but it was, you know, just... it was a hot September Labor Day and you just tried as hard as you could, but you just couldn't make it. There were a lot of them like that really. It's hard to pinpoint any one.

RF Did you get to work on any large campaign fires?

KS Oh, yeah, yeah..., every position there was... yeah, they made us... on that particular [fire] that year they made us the crew foremen of these crews they brought in and we were just first year jumpers but they made everybody crew foremen, you had a crew of about 30 men and then progressively you got involved in all facets of it on big fires. The Corn Creek fire in the '60's over on the Salmon I was air attack boss, air coordinator, you know, spent almost 15 hours a day just orbiting the fire and calling in the tankers when the smoke would clear and [calling] in the cargo planes. But, you know, you were diversified when you weren't doing that why you were in there dropping cargo out of a C46 or a C47 to the fire camps scattered all over. So, yeah, we got involved in it. They usually on those periods of critical fire conditions why they didn't use jumpers that much as fire overhead because of the possibility of new fires... new starts somewhere else. They would like to keep a nucleus of them here and there so if there was another storm come through or another man caused situation why they had some back up. Some of them fires really depleted the forests of fire fighters, you know, not only the forest it was on but forest all over the west they pulled into these things, and the south, and the east.

RF What was the most jumpers you jumped on a fire?
KS Oh, gosh, the most I was ever on I think was up on the Nez Perce in about '56... I can't remember there... on Kelly's Mountain there must have been 60, 70 of us there, and then over by Stanley on the Challis there were... my gosh there must have been 60, 70 of us from McCall, Missoula, Idaho City converged on those.

RF Hum, so you did most of the cargo drops then while you were a foreman.

KS Well, that was part of the job of a squad leader or a foreman was you were in charge of cargo, making sure it was done properly, and getting in an airplane properly, and tying it down properly, and... and getting it delivered. The pilot he's the old boy that blows the horn when it's to be dropped so that ain't your fault if you miss the DZ, it's getting it out the door when he blows the horn [laughs].

RF [laughs] You make sure you don't go fall when you're....

KS Yeah, you want to make sure you're tethered in there and don't go with it.

RF You're tethered in right?

KS Well, you can... you should be. We were supposed to wear safety harnesses but they are so awkward when you are wrestling cargo in a DC3 or a C46 to be tied into a static cable up here trying to work and... and I know, truthfully, I unhooked it and I know many, many guys did. In fact they wanted to be free if something happened they could run out that door and pull the rip cord on their emergency chute.

RF You were flying high enough on those cargo runs that you're...?

KS Well you hope and pray that if something happens you're coming over a canyon. There's a lot of canyons with a lot of depth to them [laughs].

RF [laughs] Yeah, I've heard some of those runs are pretty low.

KS Oh, yeah, like I was telling you in that Corn Creek, you know, we had to drop way into this one fire camp down there. Kenny Roth was flying, he's a Missoulian. I think he's retired... man, to pull out of there with the... you know, you go in make your drop and then pull that DC3 out of there... They fire wall them engines to get it out of there and, you know, that's pretty serious. You're pulling them old planes up like that. Took many a long pass to cool them down and then drop way back down in there and then it was the same old thing, go clear out of the main Salmon and the Middle Fork and back out.

RF Um, um. The stories those pilots can tell, huh.
KS Oh, boy, K. Roth has got some good ones. I hope you can interview him [laughs]. The only guy I knew that does barrel rolls in a DC3 [laughs].

RF [laughs] Really?

KS Unintentionally.

RF Oh.

KS I'm glad I wasn't with him because he left part of the stabilizer on a rock on the ridge that he went over the top of.

RF This was on a cargo run or something?

KS Spraying, yeah [laughs].

RF Got any real memorable fires that you just remember really well?

KS Oh, yeah, several. There was one in New Mexico we jumped on Memorial Day once, a whole bunch of us. And I just got down and hit the ground and was picking up my chute and this guy from Missoula jumped right behind me, and he hit right... oh, from here to that door on a rock, a big rock, and snap, snap went both of this legs. And it was getting late at night and we couldn't get him out. We spent the whole night building the helicopter spot and we didn't have a chain saw or anything that worked decent and it was scrub oak, and mountain mahogany, and juniper and we worked, worked, worked all night long and we were trying to console this poor guy, he was in pain and, you know, it's... one of those. And there's a lot of them that bring back lots of memories. You know, lots of good fellowship on them fires. Work, man you work on some of them. And at nighttime on these alpine fires is when you want to get them. A lot of these fires it is [to] try get them lined and knocked down at night, you know, because when that sun comes up in the morning it don't take long for the heating, and the humidity to drop off and the thing to really get going again. And you'd work until you were just silly, you know, and you'd lay down, take a break, light a cigarette, and lay back on the fire line, and the first thing you'd wake yourself up snoring you were so tired. There was a lot of them like that. But, oh, just... there's so many things you couldn't name all the different things that happened on fires that you remember.

RF Got any pack outs that you remember?

KS Oh, a lot of good ones, yeah, that was... that was enjoyable the pack outs because you met so many people from many walks of life. And, ah, when you jump before we got these helicopters and start ferrying the guys... ferrying us off it became very impersonal, you didn't feel the touch of the people that were depending on the forest as a living, like the ranchers, and the sheep herder, and the housewife that lived in a little cabin and
fixed you coffee, and get on the crank telephone and call the
district ranger who only had three or four employees to send the
truck up there and get you and all the trucks he had was a stake
rack for horses and you'd all stand up in the back like a herd of
cattle and take a ride to Challis or somewhere. But the pack
outs, oh, were brutal. That pack weighed a ton. But there was
enough humor, and everybody laughed at each other, and we all
made it. And loved it. And it just showed the true grit in
everybody, that you could do it. But the great thing a lot of
the guys will tell you, that you interview is back in them days
it was the personal touch, you got to meet the people surrounding
the forest or in the forest, not only employees but the people
that had a little saw mill here, or the people that had a little
gold mine operation over here, or somebody had a ranch adjacent
to it that "hey, you got to sit down and eat with us," you know,
and all this and... and you found out really what people were
like and loved them. Yeah, great people.

RF That helps the P.R. a lot of course [inaudible].

KS And, ah, and at Region III really the people down there were
just [kisses his finger tips] super nicer to anything that I ever
saw. Really it didn't make a difference who they were, they seen
them jumpers carrying them packs or standing by the highway or a
dirt road man they'd stop and throw you in and take you to Silver
City even if they were going to Lordsburg or some other
direction, oh, yeah.

RF Was that the most enjoyable place you worked was down there
in Region III?

KS No, comparable to Idaho and the rest of the Northwest. I
enjoyed Silver, I really did, but it was comparable to the place
I worked, Idaho City, it was small and everybody knew everybody.
Nah, it was... it was comparable.

RF When did they start bringing the helicopters in to ferry you
guys out?

KS Well, ah, [sighs] the late 50's I think is when they
started. I know they started... they brought two G3's in down in
New Mexico and they picked up... came [laughs] to pick Yogi and I
up and when we finally come out of the brush from hiding
[laughs]. They couldn't get them off the ground with one of us
and our gear in it so they had to leave the gear there and take
us to this ranch on the Sapio River and come back and get the
gear. And then the old fire control boss, Joey, was there and he
drove us from the Sapio Valley into Silver City. He wasn't too
impressed either. But then they started, you know, with their
super-charged models and then they came out with the first real
work horse of the copters in fire control was a French copter
called an Alloutte, and Bob Tremble had that on contract down on
the Gila and it was a work horse really. It's buried now along
with him. But back to your question... I think the late '50's
they had like a rescue or something down on the Salmon River. I
think they used a couple of them after the middle of the 50's they had just tried them, you know. But they were very inapt [sic] to high... high altitude flying at that time.

RF  Ah, did you get to jump any rescue jumps?

KS  Oh, yeah, yeah, I lucked out and didn't get in into any of the gory ones. Ah, the worst one I can... this one wasn't bad it was just a guy had a seizure of epilepsy and we had to get him. He was strangling and we made four trips over there to try... it was high in the rocky craig south of the Boise Forest. We made four trips over there before the wind... and then it was still blowing like hell, we jumped anyhow because it was getting late. And we had a stretcher with a wheel on it and we had to tie a stick in his mouth to keep him from strangling. I think we got him on that stretcher about 6:00 in the evening and a crew come in from the road and helped us and it was damn near five o'clock in the morning when we got out to that trail on Lava Mountain and then got him on a... they had a plane there at the runway... there was a prairie airstrip. And the ranchers had lined lights up. Here again you'd go with the cooperation of the people and they'd lined their trucks up along the runway so this plane could see to get off and got him into Boise. And he lived. I was really quite fortunate that I didn't have to get in on some of them airplane wrecks. Lost a very good friend back on Norton Creek, the only boy that we lost actually with the jumper operation. But I went in on support dropping stretchers and everything down there in the canyon [long pause] and of course they never told me who it was, and him and I had just finished training the new men about a week before and him and his pilot went straight in. No I was lucky that I didn't get in on the... pick up the human remains bag and pick stuff up all over the mountain.

RF  Yeah. But the jumpers were regularly used for this sort of thing?

KS  You bet, you bet. I know in Idaho and I'm sure in Montana it was their first source to get somebody in there immediately in case of survivors, you know. And generally you had a damn fire to contend with it, too. And some of the guys that I jumped with, no matter, they always were unlucky and they were right at the jump list when these damn wrecks happened, right on top, and I really felt sorry for them because it still haunts a lot of them... still haunts them. And aircraft disaster is a terrible thing.

RF  Yeah, and not that infrequent are they so in the mountains, huh.

KS  Yeah.

RF  When you worked on these big fires with the ground crews and a variety of other kinds of fire fighters, did you all work pretty well together? Or was there kind of a rivalry?
KS Well, I think there was a little rivalry, but the jumpers always stayed in a crew of their own; they didn't generally intermingle with any other crews. And I think that there was a little rivalry there. We liked to watch people see our dust... the widest fire line in the world, the deepest fire line, the cleanest fire line, and the fastest fire line... which I always enjoyed.

RF Did you get a lot of opportunities to be relieved and not have to do the mop up?

KS Depends on the size of the fire. You know, when we got a crew of jumpers, maybe twenty guys, on a 10,000 acre fire, dead of summer, it's kind of stupid to leave them initial attack people there mopping up for a week when they've picked up these other fire fighters that can not be used for initial attack. And at times like that is the only time that I thought mop up was ridiculous. But the other times, you know, when hell you might come in on a fire and it might start raining for two months, hell there's hours to be worked there, you might as well be there than sitting back twidling your thumbs at the camp doing project work.

RF I have some friends who are fire, just ground fire fighters and they kind of complain about the smokejumpers... [laughs]....

KS Yeah, they do Well, really in reality it isn't their fault. That's a decision made by the fire dispatcher. I would hate to have my ass hanging if I was a fire dispatcher. And there's been cases where they have pulled this crap,, and I don't mind admitting it and putting the finger on who, but they did that back in, I think '66 on the Boise, and got their tit in the ringer but they lied their way out of it. They had every jumper in the world on one fire clear in the back country with value class nothing,, you know, no water shed or nothing. And we got up and as it broke sunlight on that fire we could see a humungous thunder storm coming across the Boise Valley right for the forest. And he never, they never, started pulling jumpers off of there until it was too late and the whole damn Garden Valley and the whole world was on fire. They just run out of people. But, yeah, I know the animosity of the ground person, "well they ain't going to hang around for the dirty work". Well that's not their fault, it's up to the dispatcher. Sure a lot of them... I'd hate to stay there... been monotonous as the devil.

RF As you progressed through your career did you notice any changes in the nature of the smokejumpers, in either their attitudes or their backgrounds or anything as a group?

KS Well I think really the attitude of the nation influenced a lot of their attitudes during the Korean... the Viet Nam War, I really could see that. And people's attitudes and the hatred toward the establishment and all that, that really did sneak into the organizations. Well, I don't know, it always seems like the old years were the better ones, but I guess the guys that are jumping now will look back and say right now was a good time. I
think people are all basically the same, I think that all stems back to leadership. I mean you could have the same people and if a person can't get the work out of them or be fair with them and treat them right, and they treat you right. But then another person could take them and it might work the other way. So... no I think people are basically the same, I don't think their attitudes have changed. I think if it has it's... somebody's letting them change it for themselves and they shouldn't be. I think that depends on the people that are running the show.

RF Were there many...?

KS ... and that goes not only from the jumpers but that goes on up the steps to the regional office and the Washington office and the people making the decisions, and some of them people that are making decisions I don't know why in the hell they're in Washington on in a regional office.

RF Yeah, they make things that would effect [laughs]... effect you guys and....

KS Oh, yeah, you know, sit around in the winter and dream up... oh, they had some goofy plan, they were going to orbit guys on the ends of ropes down the fires, and goofy stuff, you know! You know, the jumpers, some of their best pay they made and some of the more enjoyable pay they made years ago was their pack out, they made a few hours packing out to the road. Well they introduced these helicopters which cost them through the nose! The jumper, here he's risked his neck to get out there and do a good job and he may pick up four or five more hours packing out, but they figured it was cheaper to rent a helicopter at $350/$400 an hour to do the same job, you know. And decisions, decisions, you know... this new slurry is going to take care of this... you ain't never going to put a fire out with fire retardant, you always need people there. And the expense in the last... since the late 50's when they introduced copters and aerial tankers, and we've had hellacious [sic] big fires ever since. The money spent on most of the slurry on these big fires is just like peeing in the ocean, you're not going to make a difference. And some of those decisions are just stupid! And then they'll cut back on jumper operations somewhere... a nickel or this or a nickel of that, but throw it away with 5000 gallons of slurry that ain't helping a damn thing.

RF Why do you suppose the smokejumping project has such a hard time convincing...?

KS ... selling their product? I have no idea.

RF Yeah, well they sell it to the communities.

KS Yeah, all the communities they get... and somebody's farming out there in the valley at Colville that's dependent on irrigation water, and those smokejumpers are saving a watershed that he's depending on getting irrigation water from. You talk
to the common person like that and they say "hey you guys are really doing a good job," you know. The common person walking up and down the street thinks that smokejumping is unique and is the way to fight fires, but boy sell the product on upstairs where the green blood is and it's a different story.

RF Hum, that's something that's come through all these interviews, how everybody says that the project whenever they were in it was on thin ice, and that's why they had to....

KS Right, it seems like there was always a threat to it like... "ah, we're going to dump it, what the heck," you know, and God the guys had to, you know, everybody had to just really bend over and sweat to... to make some ideological bastard understand that it was a necessary tool that the Forest Service had. It was hard enough in Day One to convince them to even try it! But man I tell you it's proved itself... it's proved itself.

RF Did you guys do pretty well bringing all your gear back out?

KS Oh, yeah, yes, you bet you, you bet. If you left a chute or anything with a serial number on it you'd better be planning on a visit from the F.B.I... "where'd that go to?" If you lost a chute, like I lost that one in a tree that time you bring back all the hardwear because that's government property. You know, during those eras why sport parachuting and parachuting was a big time, well somebody could say "ah, sell that hummer for 50 bucks," you know. No, you brought your gear back. You were issued that gear and you'd better bring it back. New Mexico had a different system. They issued you two sets of gear down there. I don't know if they still do or not. But they wanted you back, and if the packer couldn't get your gear back you would leave it and you would have another set back there, another harness, another... and that worked out pretty good. However, the Gila is not a large area like, you know, from here to Kooskia and from Kooskia down to Grangeville and down to McCall, it's not an area like that where you couldn't get it out, you know, you couldn't have sets of gear scattered all over this world. But, no, that was pretty thorough in training, you brought your gear home with you. If you didn't bring your gear you went to the bottom of the jump list and stayed until you got it, even if you went and got it on your own time, that was our policy in Region IV.

RF That must have been kind of hard to find too, huh.

KS You damn right [laughs]!

RF Oh, well this proves what they're saying [laughs].

KS No, you learned if you didn't bring that gear back or have arrangements, or was told how to get it back, why you might as well plan on not getting your name on the jump list until it's back cause you're just a ground pounder.

RF Did you notice from '55 to '71 real changes in the overhead
and with the way that the operation was structured?

KS Well only in my case. See I got hurt in '69 and through '71 I was in and out of the hospital and trying to go back to work. And in '69 they closed Idaho City down and moved it to Boise. They spent I don't know how many million dollars on the unit down in Boise and moved these people down inside a metropolis area with no project work to do, nothing to do but hang in that loft and be affiliated with all the brass at this new fancy interagency fire center. And I... I could see the morale of the troops change. It was pretty comfortable in that airconditioned building out there on the desert and nothing to do, hide out in the basement, sleep all day, party all night. I could see the attitude changing. They moved the spike camp down to Idaho City in 1948 as a try out basis. They were there from 1948 to 1969, that's a pretty good trial basis, 21 years. And I told them when they started talking this Boise thing I said "it'll never work, you can't keep the guys busy on project work, you're a good 30 miles from any part of the forest to do project work and you ruin a whole day just taking them out there and bringing them back and it isn't going to work," and I told the brass that and they told me I was crazy. Well I think it lasted in Boise nine years and it's folded. They eliminated Boise and put all the jumpers back in McCall like it was in 1947. The big cycle's maybe starting all over again. But down in Idaho City when they came there in 1948 they converted a horse barn and added onto it for a parachute loft, had two surplus barracks from a CCC camp that was out there by Idaho City, so they had a hell of a lot invested, probably close to $5,000 in setting up that operation, so 21 years later the Forest Service gets in bed with their damn cousin the B.L.M. and spends about $10,000,000 on that project in Boise which they aren't even using now. A big training center, jump tower, let down trainers, they're just sitting out there in the desert. But, yes I've seen the attitude of the people change when they... I told the boss, the big man out of the fire center or the big Boise National Forest fire chief, that they'll get down there and loose their identity with 125,000 people in the city of Boise. When they leave that thing at 5:00 at night you don't know where they're going and you're not going to pay them any standby and you're not going to tell them they have to be on call, you can but that ain't going to make any difference. Whereas these other units, these small units everybody did everything together. At Idaho City you knew you were obligated if you were in the first two plane loads without pay you'd stay there until flying time was over. And it was just things like that, and all that closeness deteriorated. And hell, you know, it become a little Missoula, you know, they didn't know their... they didn't stay in the dorm, some of them stayed at home, some of them stayed at their girlfriends, some of them had other jobs... it lost it's identity. And there sits a very, very nice parachute loft and fire cache down there built for smokejumping. I suppose the B.L.M.'s got it full of radios or something.

RF That's a crime.
KS   Yeah.

RF   What was some of the better, more memorable... your favorite project work that you did?

KS   Oh, I liked telephone line on live trees. I hated climbing poles. And the jumpers at Idaho City did a lot of pole cutting for the forest, we’d cut them and peel them. We had our own dipping vats set up and a derrick to lift them and we’d cut these poles on project in the spring, and peel them, and deck ‘em, and dry ‘em, and then we’d bring them in and treat them, and haul them to the ranger districts that needed replacement poles or posts. And, you know, building fences, corrals... a jumper could do anything from carpenter work to laying cinder blocks to just about everything but being a midwife, and I think some of them could do that too.

RF   Sounds like it’d be great for a job application if you’re looking for something else, huh [laughs], you’ve done it all.

KS   Yeah, [laughs] and it says on the thing "as other jobs assigned" and [laughs] that’s the truth. It’s really funny though, you know, some people that came were so green. I had this one guy, I won’t mention his name because I think he’s still active. I wanted to have the guys build some drying racks for bedrolls and chutes, cargo chutes and stuff, when they got wet on a thunder storm or something out on a fire. I told this guy to go out and dig about three post holes, and I showed him where, and do you know he didn’t know what a post hole was? I thought "where have you been all your life?" But, you know, you run into things like that [laughs].

RF   [laughs] Trying to keep a straight face while you’re explaining [laughs].

KS   Yeah, yeah, uh huh, yeah.

RF   Well you say you got injured in ’69, was that on a fire?

KS   Yeah, yeah, it was on Smith Creek. We jumped a fire up there. We’d had a bunch of them. It was the 10th of September and we were getting short of guys so we got hit pretty hard across the south end. And myself and two other guys jumped this fire and it was a mean, dirty, filthy thing and we were on it until late in the evening. And they had our other copter, the contract helicopter, up on the north end of the forest. We were on the south end. The picked up a contract helicopter (it was a brand new F1100 Fairchild-Hiller), and brought it in to pick us up. And when we loaded up and lifted off the mountain, it was really steep and he got her fired up, and we got our forward speed down the mountain, and he went into climb out translation, I guess they call it, and she quit. And we went down in a hurry down the mountain, end over end over end. We had some Missoula jumpers on standby in Boise and they came out and jumped to get us out. And they brought the other copter down from the north
end to help get us out. But it... it was a mess. We didn't lose anybody, thank God. But I got multiple back injuries from the thing that I'll have until the day they plant me, and they keep getting worse.

RF Of all things to have done all those jumps and then....

KS I said "the jumping won't get you, it's the damn airplanes and helicopters that kill people."

RF Have they had many problems with helicopters quitting?

KS That year was a booger... everything. Yeah, they've had so... that... that year of '69 I... they had a lot of incidents. I dropped some guys on one down in California that he let the copter foreman out and he bounced that damn thing off the mountain and the blade come down and chopped this guys head off. Seemed like that year there was just something... they lost one in Utah and killed some people in Alaska... and I can't remember. Maybe they're better now, I don't know.

RF They must have a pretty powerful pull somewhere up high in the system to keep on....

KS Somebody's got something going there... a lobbyist or something, I guess. You know a lot of people love them and believe in them and all that, but they've had their times with them.

RF And so then you stayed on??

KS I tried to stay on a couple more years and then the forest supervisor and I got together and we figured I wasn't doing anything... I was on pain killers all the time and was just miserable. One thing I was a stickler for, if a plane was sitting on the ramp you never walked into the wing of that plane. And I gave a lot of pushups for people doing that. And one night down there at the fire center I was going to take this fire call and it was pretty confusing. They had the Twin Otter all loaded up and props running and I walked right through the prop, right through! Between the cockpit and the blade there's about this much room. I never even said another word, I threw the clip board out on the ramp, and I turned around, and got in the car, and then went home and I haven't been back since. Because you've got to have all your shit together when you're doing this job, and something was trying to tell me to get the hell away from it because I... I know I wasn't doing a good job. When I'd go spot guys I would be so miserable in pain in the plane that I'd say "hey we can't jump it, let's go home," you know. I wasn't doing them a good job. Because it was just that nagging damn pain in my neck and my head and my back and I just.... So the Boise National retired me out the best they could.

RF When you look back all your years smokejumping, what kind of feelings do you have?
KS Great! A feeling of accomplishment; a real feeling of brotherhood, some damn fine people. And you never know, it's invisible, you never know what we saved because you don't know which one of them little fires or them medium sized fires that we caught that really could have devastated the land. You never know. That's an unknown medium out there but I still have the feeling that we've all did our share really.

RF If you had total control over the future of the project what sort of changes would you institute or what sort of things would you like to see?

KS I'd move it back to like it was in the early '60's.

RF You mean decentralized and...?

KS Decentralized and put these small camps out like they had, put them out there where the forests can use them. When there's no fires the forests can use those people for anything, any project and keep the bureaucracy out of it, let the forests and the project handle itself.

RF Seems like it should be a real community based sort of a thing.

KS Yeah, it should be a community effort between the forest and the project.

RF Is there anything else you'd like to add?

KS [laughs]. Nope. Yeah, where's the vodka tonics [laughs]?

RF [laughs] O.K. well thanks a lot I really appreciate....

KS You bet, you bet.

RF That was an excellent interview.

KS Thank you.

END OF TAPE