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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 077-001
Interviewee: Donald Grant “Don” MacKenzie
Interviewer: N/A
Date of Interview: circa 1970s

Note: This is not an oral history interview. It is a speech that Donald MacKenzie gave at the K. Walford Senior Center in Missoula, Montana, about logging during the 1910s and 1920s in the Nine Mile and on the Blackfoot River.

Note: Multiple individuals ask Mr. MacKenzie questions following his speech. All of those individuals have been marked as “Unidentified Speaker” or “US”.

Donald MacKenzie: Friends, my name is Don MacKenzie just so that you all may know that who I am. First of all I would like to say that I am not a lecturer, I'm not a speech maker. My education has been very limited, but if you want to listen to me how do the best I can to give you what I know.

The property that's known today as the Anaconda Lumber Department in Bonner at that...before them was known as the Big Blackfoot Milling Company owned by the former A.B. Hammond and his associates who also owned the mercantile store here in Missoula [Missoula Mercantile]. In 1900...the summer in 1904, the Big Blackfoot Milling Company decided to go into the railroad logging. They started grading a railroad about three miles upriver, up the Blackfoot River from McNamara's Landing—I'm sure you all know where McNamara's Landing is—and built up a railroad bed here through the Potomac Valley to a point about two miles this side of the Greenough Post Office. From there, they veered off to the northeast and went in three miles into the timber where they established a large logging camp.

That fall, they purchased two 30-ton locomotives in Lima, Ohio, known as Shay locomotives, or Lima locomotives. They're not a rod engine such as you see on the main line. They were driven by gears on the side. They weren't built for speed. They were built for power to push railroad cars up heavy grades up to 6 percent.

The two locomotives were taken in the regular trains to Bonner, where they were dismantled, the boiler was taken off the frame, and the wheels and the trucks were taken off the frame. The cab was taken off, and each one of those were loaded onto sleds and hauled up to McNamara's Landing where they were re-assembled by an expert who came out here from the factory and put them together.

Incidentally, talking about the railroad, the railroad steel was hauled by sled and by harsh wagons from Missoula...from Bonner up to McNamara's Landing and laid into the woods a distance from McNamara's Landing to the extreme end where their headquarters camp course

would be about, I imagine, would be about ten miles. There they began their logging, and things went along.

In 1908, the Big Blackfoot Milling Company took on the first sale that the United States Forest Service ever made. Was made at Seeley Lake, Montana, to the black Big Blackfoot Milling Company. That was in 1907. They established camps at Seeley Lake, logged with sleighs in the wintertime, decked their logs in the summertime, and hauled them on sleighs in the wintertime and dumped them in the lake. Drove them down the Clearwater and into the Blackfoot and onto Bonner, where they picked up the logs that were taken into Potomac here on the (unintelligible) McNamara's Landing. They came in on the drive too.

1908, the holdings, the Bonner plant, the timber holdings—everything that was owned by the A.B. Hammond Lumber Company or the Big Blackfoot Lumber Company was acquired by the...what was then formed, the lumber department of the Anaconda Company [Anaconda Copper Mining Company]. The milling end was known as the lumber department to the Anaconda Company, and the logging was known as the logging division of the Anaconda Company.

In the spring of 1911, the logging to the northeast from Potomac was finished and ended. The railroad was taken up clear down to McNamara's, and that same summer the Milwaukee Railroad built a steel bridge across the river at McNamara's and pushed the Milwaukee—a branch of the Milwaukee Railroad—in through the Potomac Valley on the same grade that the Anaconda...or the Big Blackfoot Milling Company had for their little railroad. It ended, the Milwaukee spur ended, just where the road to the village of Potomac takes off the main highway as you go through the Blackfoot. That was the end of the Milwaukee line.

Now then, the Anaconda Company, in turn, started a branch railroad that tied into the Milwaukee Railroad just where the Potomac Post Office now stands, just a little bit to the north. Don't look at me so hard now! (laughs) Took off across the valley to the southwest. Established a camp close to where this young lady here was raised and then went on up into Arkansas Creek and Charcoal Creek just as far as it could go with the railroad. Then built chutes into the hills, you know, and slid the logs down on the chutes to the landing, loaded them on the cars, turned them over to the Milwaukee Railroad, and the Milwaukee Railroad to them to Bonner.

That went on from 19...the fall of 1911 until the spring of 1914. 1914, they built another spur and took off into Union Creek which was to the southeast from Potomac. There logged up until the fall of 1916. 1915, the summer of 1915, they took the time and the work to start a branch railroad from Sudan, west of Missoula here, just beyond the Nine Mile House—the old Nine Mile House. They started the branch line there into the little village of Stark, and about two miles beyond Stark. Some of you know, no doubt. That was the Nine Mile up Nine Mile Creek.

The fall of 19...That was...I said 16. No, it was the fall of 1915 that railroad was put in. Fall 1916, they moved in there in October of 1916 and established a great big camp just about a mile further up the creek from Stark. Things went quite smoothly. April 1917, the war broke out. We were caught up in cause the Wobblies—the IWW are the Wobblies. A big strike come on the first day of June 1917, just as we were getting into the war. Well, a bunch of us young fellows, at that time, we saw that we're going to get caught in the draft so we went and enlisted in the army and took our turn for the military and for the country. All of us who were young men at that time went to France. After we returned, we all got our jobs back. I'll tell you about that later on—those jobs.

We all got our jobs back, and we went at it and tried to get things back on an even keel again. It was in desperate shape during the war. There was no discipline. There was no respect. Nobody cared what they did or how they did it, but things drifted back to normalcy and we went on as before up until 1925. 1925, they decided to go back to the Blackfoot again. They were all homesick for the Blackfoot. So they come so with the Company. So we went back to the Blackfoot, and we started building a railroad from Nine Mile prairie into Greenough and up Elk Creek. We built about, oh, 14 miles of grade that year, laid in the tracks of 1926, and built a headquarters camp right on the ranch that young Lindbergh (?) owns now. Paul Greenough owned it at that time. That was the summer and fall of 1926, and by the way, my bride lived in a tent for six months.

We have logged there, and got out the timber, delivered it to the Milwaukee. The Milwaukee, in the meantime, they built the spur...They took out the spur from Potomac and built the grade and the spur up the Blackfoot River clear to Nine Mile prairie. We delivered the logs to them at that point. That went on until 1934. 1934, the Milwaukee extended their branch spur to Cottonwood which is beyond the Sperry Grade, and we took off there and built, through the Boyd Ranch, six miles of track up to Woodward. We operated at Woodward under pretty hazardous conditions at times. Great country for snow. We had lots of troubles, but we always got the logs and kept the mill in logs. Let's see if I left anything out here. [pauses]

On this setting, the Milwaukee ran over our track and come into the headquarters. We delivered the logs...We just took them to our...from the woods into our headquarters camp, and that made the Milwaukee crew very happy because they got a great big meal there at midnight every night when they come in with the train.

This seems like a kind of a (unintelligible) of my experiences logging, but if I went into the heartaches and the troubles and the many things that comes in the life of a logger, you'd be amazed to know it. Between dealing with labor and railroad wrecks and everything else that goes with delivering logs and keeping a steady stream of logs going into a mill that got (unintelligible) like an elephant, it just takes a lot of doing.

Now then I want to cut this short. I just don't know a great deal more to say. However, I'd like to give you a little resume of my part played in this thing of logging. Right after the devastating

fire of 1910 that took the toll of the greater part of the...a great part of the timber of the Northwest—Montana, Idaho, and Washington—I landed, as a young kid about 22 years old and quite green, in Bonner. I went into the office, and I went to a man who's manager there. He was a charge of all the woods and everything. His name was Kenneth Ross, a great big stalwart Scotch-Nova Scotian. (laughs) Much to my good luck, I told him who I was and give him my name and told him that I had worked a couple of years in the woods down in Colorado but that I didn't know a great deal about it. So he gave me a note to the manager of the logging camps, and I got a job and I worked at common labor from 1910 until 1913. 1913, I got a job as scaler—scaling logs—and I thought that was quite a thing. Boy, I'm sure going to town. I was at that for about a year and a half, and I got a job as time keeper. Well, this is the limit. I just can't go further than this. (laughs) Well, after we moved to Nine Mile, I got a job as camp foreman, and I was camp foreman until I went into the army.

After putting in 22 months in France, I came back with the rest of the fellows, and and I went back on my job as camp foreman and I worked at that until June the 8th, 1923. I was promoted to logging manager. Now, that is the ultimate. I just can't go further than this. (laughs)

A terrible thing happened the day I took over the Anaconda camps. A tornado came about noon the first day I was on the job, knocked down a tree and killed two men. After I worked a year as manager out of the camps, I decided I have to do one or two things now. I really got to take more grief in my life or else get out of it and go back with a (unintelligible) and an ax and do what the rest of the boys are doing. I can't go along this way. I had a home—nice home of my own.

In my younger days when I was quite, quite young, I courted a girl down in Colorado. She turned me down three times. (laughs) Finally, I wrote to her and I told her I'd give you one last chance. We were married in April 11, 1924. We lived for 18 happy years in the woods together, and things have gone very smoothly for me ever since. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be where I am today if it hadn't been for her. I know that I would never stayed on my job because there was too much responsibility and too much other things, but for her sake I took it all. I came out of it pretty good. I didn't do bad. I was manager of the Anaconda camp from 1923 until 1958. I retired January the 1st, 1958, and I've been living happily and neatly ever since. Doing for Mr. Hagen and all the rest of the bums that ask me to do something (laughs)

But before I close, I would like to say that when we moved to the southwest of the Potomac Valley, I was quite bashful and quite docile and humble, but I did get acquainted with a family who was most the most respected family in the Potomac Valley. They were honored and respected by everybody that knew them. Their daughters are here today. Ellen, stand up. Both of you stand up so the people will know you. Come on, Grace, you too. Come on. There you are.

[applause]

An old time friend and my wife. I think this concludes my (unintelligible).

Unidentified Speaker: Listen, how about a few questions before—

DM: Go ahead.

US: What were the woods like? You mentioned you spent 18 years in the woods before you got out, but what were the camps like out in 1924? How many men did you have? How did they live?

DM: Oh, well I overlooked these things. It averaged...average about 100 men to a camp, and when I first came there the food was a disaster. It was just horrible. Mulligan for breakfast, mulligan for noon, and mulligan for supper. But we got a new supply man, and by the way another Scotsman from Michigan—man by the name of McEwan (?). Mr. McEwan, maybe you remember Mr. McEwan. (laughs)

There's another lady that I know from Bonner. That's Bertha Thibodeaux's (?) aunt. This man McEwan, he came and he ordered bacon and he ordered ham and he ordered pretzels and Rice Krispies and everything you could think of—the very first order. Had an onld-time timekeeper there by the name Kelly. He said, "You'll get fired tomorrow, boy, for asking for that. Everything he asked for came on the next supply car, and from there we lived the life of Riley. Everybody was happy and satisfied and eating good, and we got steaks and we got ham and bacon for breakfast and eggs. Everything we asked for. It was that way up until he and I worked together from 1912—he came there 1912—and we worked together until we retired together in 1958. He was my bookkeeper and supply man.

In the power line, we averaged 280 head of horses. We used to buy all the grain and the hay every rancher had in Potomac Valley and the Helmville Valley, Evando Valley. When we moved to Nine Mile we bought everything up that was raised in the Frenchtown Valley, and that went on until 1926 when we moved back to Greenough and then we went mechanical. We had to do away with horses because we couldn't get teamsters so we went into tractor business. Ted Terrell (?) will tell you about that. Get up, Ted, by golly, we'd like to see you. Yes sir, he was a mechanic.

1926, we became mechanized, and they're going pretty much on the same line right today. Anything else? Anybody?

US: Tell them about the early days of '16 when the boys come in sock all wet and they had the stove, hanging up the (unintelligible).

DM: That was before the days of dryers. Come in wet at night and there's two poles—one on each side hanging on the rafters above the stove—and everybody hang their wet clothes and their wet socks. Boy, Elizabeth (unintelligible) couldn't stand much. (laughs)

US: (unintelligible)

DM: Pardon?

US: How about a lot of (unintelligible).

DM: Oh yes, indeed. Lot of horses, but...One thing those days, in the early days, you had to pay for a horse. A man didn't mean so much. They didn't have to pay for the men. (Unintelligible) on the bunk. I was there for five days with a broken leg before they got me into the hospital, but that's one good thing I'll give the Wobblies credit for. They sure removed all that kind of stuff. Men were taken into consideration from there on. Well—

US: I visited a man who was the representative of the union who is quite sick, and I believe that Don is one of the few people who have been a pallbearer at both the management and the union side. He's been kind of the in-between, but I know that he's very highly respected by the men who work. I can understand too, if I were eating mulligan and all of a sudden got eggs (unintelligible).

DM: Yes, you bet.

Unidentified Speaker 2: Did you ever have to cook by fire and (unintelligible).

DM: (unintelligible) Oh yes, oh yes, indeed. It hasn't been so very long since Gus died.

US: (unintelligible)

DM: He was a top cook. No, you bet, Gus was a fine man not only a cook but a real good lumberjack. He could work outside too.

US: Do you remember (unintelligible)?

DM: Oh yes. The gambler. (laughs)

Unidentified Speaker 3: Don, how about...when did they get chainsaws and...was there all crosscut for—

DM: Oh yes, before that was all crosscut.

US: When did you get into the chainsaws?

DM: The first chainsaw com in about, I would say, in 1947. We got the first (unintelligible) chainsaw. We couldn't get anybody to operate them. Were so heavy you couldn't hardly pack

them around. Then the light saw come in, and we men got to work in single by themselves, you know, and things worked out very well then from there on.

US: Don, I did hear about the Norwegian who had been given a chainsaw and they told him his production would be so much faster, and it was just the same. Then after a couple years, someone showed him how to start it. (laughs)

DM: It took (unintelligible) to file the crosscut saw though. Boy, yes. I remember one old Norwegian was filing, and I come along one day and he says, "Don," he says, "I'm yanking and yanking and feeling and feeling and the boys are kicking and kicking." (laughs)

Yes, well, I guess I spoke my peace.

US: (unintelligible)

DM: Pardon?

US: Do they still maintain those camps?

DM: I don't believe there's a logging camp in the state of Montana. I don't think so. I don't know of any. I've inquired, and I can't find a camp in the old state of Montana. They all commuted. The men that took my...on the job, a lot of them were on the job, yet, that I left there—many of them. Some of them commuted from Hamilton to Lincoln. The starting point is Twin Creeks. They take their own cars and come to Twin Creeks then get on the company buses at Twin Creeks and drive clear to Lincoln—back and back to Hamilton again. I think it's all crazy. That's too far, and taking too much of the time.

US: There's a Mr. Simpson on Sweeney Creek who worked for you.

DM: Oh yes.

US: How about (unintelligible)? We realize that we have some statistics and dates. Are there any people who stood out in your mind? It was interesting—

DM: Well, now I had a little note here. Saturday, I met a man from Dixon that worked with me 60 years ago on the Blackfoot—just going on 60 years ago. His name is Charlie Kennedy (?). I went to him, and I said, "Charlie," I said, "by George you know I am asked to speak a little piece at the senior citizens next Monday." I said, "Can you remember anybody living around Missoula that worked in the camps when you and I work together there?"

Charlie said, "By George, I can't think of anybody, Don." Then he began to think, and he says, "How about George Palmer?"—he lives over here on Stoddard Street—"and Art Gilbert (?)"

Hello, Jim.

“Art Gilbert, Eddie Goodwin (?) and George Chandler (?)” All of these fellows. There’s one, two, three, four, five, and myself is six that are still living that worked 60 years ago on the Blackfoot.

US: How about when the men...how long did they live in the camps, and when did they come, and how—

DM: Well, I’ll tell you before the days of the automobile (unintelligible), we generally went in in August. We started taking logs and getting them ready for the winter’s work to chute them down the chutes into the landing. When you went in in August, you generally stayed until the 17th of March. They broke up the 17th of March. You were kind of a prisoner. You didn't get no money either unless you went to Bonner the 17th of March.

Another thing when we landed in Stark, there was a man by the name of Jimmy Scott (?) had a saloon there and a store. The company went to him and told him, now, if you’ll give up that saloon—this saloon—we’ll give you all the commissaries in all the camps and you can have the profit of the commissaries. No sir, he wasn't going to do that. He was going to keep his saloon, and the first month there was a profit of 10,000 dollars in the commissaries—the very first month we were at Stark. The same ratio, you know, right along as long as we stayed there. He could have had all that money if he had listened to the offer the company made him, but he wouldn't. He wanted that saloon. Of course, the saloon was a detriment to us because the men went there every weekend. He had to put it on the books, you know, and they’d pay when they got their money.

US: So he’d put it on the books, and they wouldn’t get their money until March?

DM: Well, in those days after we moved to Nine Mile, they started paying once a month.

US: All right.

DM: But if he had taken the commissaries, everything was gone in the book, and the company would collect and give him his check at the end of every month. He made a big mistake. He knew it too, yes, afterwards.

US: What were the hours...how long did they work.

DM: Well, when I first went to work with the company, we worked ten hours a day, and we got 24 cents an hour and we paid 75 cents a day for board. Now you can figure that out.

US: (unintelligible)

DM: Two dollars and 40 cents. Well, I tell you, if you didn't buy any socks or any tobacco or any snuff (?) in the commissary, you made 35 dollars a month. That's just what you made. Yes.

US: (unintelligible)

DM: Pardon?

US: (unintelligible)

DM: Not I.

US: (unintelligible) expenses.

DM: No, well, when they worked from the August until the 17th of March, they generally drew down something around 200 dollars.

US: For the whole winter?

DM: That's all. Two hundred dollars for the whole winter's work.

US: Don, could a man (unintelligible) cash in advance (unintelligible) sign over?

DM: No, no. There was no signing it over. No, no. They didn't do any of that. No, no.

US: Well, most of these men then, if they were in there for six months, did they have families there or were they just—

DM: Well, mostly all single people—single men, yes. Mostly (unintelligible). There wouldn't be a one out of 100 married men those days. All single people. Mostly French Canadians—good men every one of them. Scandinavians, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians. One Scotchman. (laughs)

US: Did you have much trouble talking with the IWW?

DM: Oh indeed, plenty of it. They give me the first gray hairs I ever had, Jim.

US: Tell us a little bit about that.

DM: Well, I'll tell you something. I was running camp at Nine Mile and there was a strike scheduled for a certain day that always kind of sabotage and wooden shoes and all this kind of...stickers thing, you know, they'd put up on the buildings and on the windows. Every night, every night this happened, and by golly, there was one sticker—always was way up high. I walked up to a fellow one morning when I was turning the crew out, and I said, "I say," I said, "I

believe I got enough of you.” I said, “I think you better go down the road. You’re the one that’s putting these stickers way up there.” (laughs) I had to have a ladder to take them down.

US: Basketball player? (laughs)

DM: That caused a lot of...You know, the IWW, they didn’t operate like the unions do nowadays. Their beliefs were destruction...(unintelligible). They’d drive spikes in the logs. Great big spikes like this, they’d drive into the logs, and they’d go to the mill and endanger people’s lives. Yes. They’d haul a great big tree that big around across a gulch. Then they’d go and saw a log (unintelligible), saw it as far as they could. They’d cut close in there with the saw stuck in the cut and walk away. (laughs) Those are the kind of...that was the way they operated. They were just, oh well, they were just crazy.

US: Was that the kinds of men that was around when the war started? You mentioned a little something about (unintelligible) at the time when the war started. Was that the type of man that caused all the trouble?

DM: That’s the type of man. The IWW. They started just before we got into the war. Well, they just did every mischievous thing and every rotten thing that they could think of all during the war. Tried to hold the whole thing back. Yes, that was their belief.

US: When you were in France, Don, what kind of...what was your logging...You’d go out in the woods to cut down trees?

DM: Oh yes, just the same as we did at home. We had a big meal there, and we logged in furnished lumber for the trenches and poles. Lumber for docks and for everything. My mill—the Leviathan—couldn’t land in any port in France. They had to unload her on (unintelligible) out in the ocean to get the men and the materials off. The government made a deal with the French government to build a dock that...I’ve forgotten the name of that place. Anyhow, we’ll call it Bordeaux. It wasn’t Bordeaux. It was another place. They asked for three years to build that dock. Oh well, that was impossible to the war. We would have the war ended in less than three years So, by George, I furnished the lumber and our men—engineers—went at it with their men, and they landed the Leviathan just exactly six months. Yes sir, on the new docks. Brest—that was the name of the port. That helped to end the war too.

US: Are there any other questions that—

US: Do you know if they ever had any log drives down the Clark Fork in Missoula?

DM: Pardon?

US: Did they ever float logs down the river in Missoula?

DM: Logs in the river?

US: Yes.

DM: Not to my knowledge, certainly, the only logs I know that there was two places—they were both on the Blackfoot River. The Western Lumber Company had their dam just below at Milltown. That was the Clark interests. The Bonner mill had their logs in the dam just a mile above there. I've never known logs to be in the Missoula River [Clark Fork]

US: Before you came, you did mention a (unintelligible) at McNamara's Landing and then they floated them down the river to Bonner.

DM: Yes, floated them down to Bonner, yes.

US: That's the Blackfoot?

DM: The same thing from Seeley Lake there for four years, now, operated on Forest Service timber. That floated them down the Clearwater into the Blackfoot River and then clear down to Bonner. Just took 40 days to bring the logs into Bonner from Seeley Lake.

US: Forty days?

DM: Yes.

US: Now, did you ever have log jams and things of that nature?

DM: Oh yes.

US: What?

DM: Yes, the Blackfoot was full of rocks. They'd jam...they used to shoot them out with dynamite. Yes. Then 1926 and '27, I had a log drive from Greenough, and that was smaller than the log drive they gave us to bringing in from Seeley Lake. But we had two camps that—we didn't get the railroad into them—but right on the bank of the river just above Belmont. We just put the logs in the river and most of them went down themselves on the high waters.

US: Did you have skid rows and stuff like that? We use the term "a person's on skid row", but isn't that (unintelligible) logging term? (Unintelligible)?

DM: Sure. Well, they have what they call swampers. You don't have that anymore, but in those days, the swampers ahead of the horses that paved the way and made roads for the horses to go into the logs and knocked the limbs off the trees and fixed it all up so it was easier for the horses to turn around and had a good path clear to the landing. Then we used to string the

chutes all through the hills. The chutes are logs laying in and chute out in a v-shape. We'd slide the logs down them to the landings.

US: Well, is there any other questions that anybody would want to ask? I think we have a real unusual opportunity here with a man who helped make history.

DM: Thank you.

US: (unintelligible)

[End of Interview]