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Interviewee: Henry James "Jim" Cusker

Interviewer: Liam Cody

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Liam Cody: Today's October 30, 2019. My name is Liam Cody, and today I'm interviewing rancher, farmer, teacher, and conservationist Jim Custer at his home in the Grass Valley west of Missoula, Montana. I want to start by asking you a few biographical details, Jim. To start, could you tell me what year you were born?

Jim Cusker: 1932.

LC: And where did you grow up?

JC: My first five-and-a-half years were spent in Wolf Point, Montana, where I was born. When I was coming six, my father brought the family over to Missoula to the place where we now sit. And this is where I grew up.

LC: Why did you move? Why did your father bring the family?

JC: That's an interesting question. My grandfather was a true cowboy. He came to Montana from the homestead that his father had worked in Walla Walla, Washington. He came to Montana, and this was open range country at the time and he was an extremely good cowboy. But when the open range closed up, he was encouraged by his good friend, who said, "Hank, you'd better file for a homestead," which he did. He immediately proceeded to have three sons and three daughters. My father was the oldest child, and he was a pretty good cowboy himself. But being the oldest son, he was the first to marry and wanted to continue his ranching style of life. He leased property, oh, some distance from the ranch—the home ranch. It was a bit on the small side. He decided, 'I want to see what it was like in western Montana.' He came over here and looked for some place to purchase. He found this location, which he fell in love with immediately and moved the family here. And this is where I grew up. This is once again the place I reside.

LC: Could you tell me a bit about your childhood? What was it like growing up here?

JC: Well, I consider myself blessed to have been able to grow up on a farm. Because like most children, I was quite curious about everything around me. Living on a farm you were exposed to everything around you. It was that experience that I definitely treasure.

LC: What kind of things would you do?

JC: [laughs] I guess you name it; my only brother and I did it. We ultimately each had our own horse, which we could ride around wherever we wanted to. We learned how to shoot the .22 with a great deal of accuracy. We helped my father irrigate, and as teenagers, we helped him with the haying. When I was perhaps 10 or 11 years old, we were farming with the neighbor. We would put together a haying crew and a threshing crew. That was a lot of fun. As a youngster, I, of course, got some jobs that a youngster could do, such as leading the stacking horse. It was an overshot stacker. The hay would be loaded at the front end of the stacker, and then a pulley, powered by one horse, would lift the stacker in the air and dump it in place then on what would become a stack. Then you'd back the horse up, etcetera. During the threshing time, which involved used to threshing machine, as a kid before I was able to join the threshing crew, I had the job of tending the sack in which the grain would flow from the threshing machine. A dirty, dusty job.

Of course when I got older, I did other jobs such as being on the stack itself and working with a team of horses and another crew member to pick up the bundles of grain in the field and deliver them to the threshing machine.

A really fun part about growing up here was to be involved with raising animals for the 4-H club. We specialized in hogs, fat hogs. My father had a bunch of hogs, and we would select what we hoped to be the two best. Of course, would raise them and show them at the county fair. It was a lot of fun, a lot of fun.

LC: That's really interesting. What other animals were at the fair, and what other things were people doing then?

JC: Repeat?

LC: What other things did people have at the fair?

JC: [laughs] Oh, at the time when I was growing up, the county fair was the big event of the summer for the surrounding ranchers and farmers. There would be exhibits of hay; there would be exhibits of garden vegetables. The ladies would have their quilts judged. There were vegetable garden displays. As far as agriculture was concerned, beef cattle, of course. For the ranchers, they would bring in their prize bulls and cows, and they would be judged and the top of the class, of course, received a blue ribbon and so on. For the 4-H members for the most part, they would raise animals for sale as meat animals. The fair would climax with the sale of those 4-H animals. This would include sheep, hogs, and beef. There were other 4-H projects as well that didn't involve livestock—gardening, etcetera. But the fair was a huge thing.

LC: So, you mentioned you had one brother, and your father, and your mother?

JC: Yes.

LC: What was your family like?

JC: What was the family like? In what way?

LC: Well, what were their personalities like? Who were they?

JC: Yes. Okay. My father was probably the hardest working man I have ever met. There was absolutely nothing that he wouldn't do. There are some things that he did well. There were other things that he was not skilled in, but he'd do it anyway. For example, he built log barns from the cottonwood trees that were felled right on the property. They were serviceable. Serviceable. They were not pretty, but they were serviceable. One remains that we now use as a calving shed. Very, very hardworking. However, he truly enjoyed visiting with his neighbors. I recall vividly when my brother and I and Dad were involved in getting a particular job done and a neighbor would show up, Dad would put down everything and proceed to visit with them forever, while my brother and I sat there wanting to get things done.

He was also very active as a director on the Grass Valley French Ditch, which carries water all the way from its origin a half a mile upstream from us to the location of what was the pulp mill. He was for some years the ditch rider. He had high expectations of his sons which I appreciate. I appreciate that a lot. High expectations as far as academics are concerned and certainly of behavior. Yes.

My mother, a former schoolteacher. The first year that we were here, she homeschooled me. That way they wouldn't have to deliver me to the Hell Gate grade school, which is approximately five miles away. She did a good job homeschooling me, except she was a poor penman, and I think she taught me that trait. My penmanship is occasionally legible. But when I entered school then as a second grader, there was no problem. I could read, I could write my ABCs, etcetera. My mother was a very, very talented person in working with others. She was a secretary of the Missoula County Farm Bureau for a number of years. She and Dad were 4-H leaders of our 4-H club. Name of the 4-H club was the Hell Gate Victory Workers because this was during the war. That's one thing. Yes. After the war, we changed the name to Hell Gate Busy Beavers. [laughs]

My mother, as a very talented person, gathered—let's see, selected the members of our 4-H club to be actors in the one-act plays. 4-H had plays that were sponsored by the county. You're talking about working with country bumpkins and getting them to learn their lines and to perform on stage. She was so good at it that almost every year the Hell Gate 4-H club won first prize. Yes. She was exceptionally talented. Yes. She loved the ranch, but I could sense that in some ways she felt isolated. This is quite typical of farm and ranch families that are separated by some distance from each other. That the occasional loneliness was certainly due in part to the fact that it was not until I was well in high school that we had phone service, and of course, made the isolation more severe.

LC: Absolutely. So, you mentioned your father would take his time when people did come.

JC: Oh, my, yes.

LC: What was the neighborhood like, and who lived around you?

JC: Farming and ranching, period. Farming and ranching, period.

One of the highlights—one of the social highlights—were the square dances that the community would participate in at the Hell Gate School. That was, of course, a lot of fun for them. Everyone knew everyone, and there was a very, very close bond there, of course, because they were all involved in farming, ranching. They would exchange problems, and they would go out—be invited to dinner at one place and another. Of course, they always had people here for dinner. So, yeah, a very close neighborhood. Yeah. Which was lovely.

LC: So close in bond, if far in distance I guess. How close was your nearest neighbor?

JC: [laughs] Well, the closest neighbor was only half a mile away. But there were good friends scattered all over the Missoula Valley.

LC: Who were some of the close friends of your family's?

JC: Perhaps one of the closest friends was Elmer Flynn. The old Flynn Ranch—remnants of it still exist. But at its height, it was one of the larger ranches in the Hell Gate area, and Elmer, as were all the Flynn's, strong Catholics, and Elmer was a bit of a politician. In fact, he spent a number of terms at the state legislature. Surprisingly, he and my father were strong adherents of opposite parties. My father was a Republican, and Elmer was a Democrat. In spite of that, they were very, very good friends. Other, quite close friends involved the Rembergs up Nine Mile Way. Others, the Stahls. The Stahls still live on Mullan Road. But they were friends with many people.

LC: Who were your friends?

JC: Who were my friends?

LC: Yeah, like your playmates.

JC: [laughs] When you're somewhat isolated—the Cotes who lived across the fence from us only a half mile away. Most of them were older than myself. The baby girl was a few years older than I. She would hop on her pony on Saturday morning and come down here, and my brother and I and Rose Marie would listen to *Let's Pretend*, which was a radio program for children. Fairy tales, that sort of thing. I was in love with Rose Marie. She was the tallest, most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. She was barely five feet tall, but at the time I was a lot shorter than she was.

Other friends? Yes. I had some good friends at the Hell Gate School. The Hell Gate School, at that time, fluctuated between being a one-room school and a two-room school when the population was a little higher. Yeah. So, there weren't very many kids in the entire school. One of our—my brother and I—the closest friends there were Jack and Jimmy Baumgardner. Their parents were good friends of ours. Sometimes when my folks didn't pick us up at school, we would walk down to where the Baumgardner's lived, which was not far—I would say a mile and a half from the school. The Baumgardner boys taught us how to ride a bicycle by taking us to the top of this hill going down to their house and saying, "Okay, get on the bike and go." You learn how to ride fairly quickly. But there were not many, I would say, close friends at grade school.

LC: Your brother must have been a pretty close friend?

JC: Oh, yes. Yes.

LC: Is he older or younger?

JC: He's younger. He's just a kid. He's three-and-a-half years younger than I.

LC: Okay. I wonder...you would go into Missoula to go to Hell Gate, and I'm wondering what you would have seen along the drive into town.

JC: [laughs] It was a wonderful drive. You drove the truck slowly because you wanted to see what the farmers and ranchers were doing on the drive, and that's all there was to look at. But that was important stuff. I still find myself looking at the remaining bits of agriculture if I drive into Missoula today. At the present location of the North Gate Shopping Center, there was a sugar beet factory. Directly across the road from it was a slaughterhouse. John R. Daily is still there. They no longer slaughter animals, but...Really that was it. All of the rest of it farms, ranches.

LC: When you would be looking at the farms, what kind of things would you look for?

JC: Oh. Well, of course you would look for how was a hay crop doing. Many of the farmers grew sugar beets. Excellent cash crop, excellent cash crop, and we'd look at that. Yeah. Certainly take a look at the livestock, although those ranchers that had a lot of cattle also had summer leases of Forest Service land for pasture. We'd look at the grain. Of course, we'd comment on "[tongue click], Dog-gone-it [unintelligible] is a little behind in his..." etcetera. But yeah, those are important things. The trips to town often included bringing a bunch of eggs to a grocery store where we traded. They would take the eggs, and we'd get produce. Often, it would involve a cream can filled with cream, which we delivered to the creamery because the creamery used it to make butter, etcetera.

LC: How big would that can be?

JC: The can was...oh, my, my, my. More than five gallons I would suggest. It was fairly heavy.

LC: You mentioned you would raise hogs, you had cattle, eggs, grain?

JC: Right.

LC: Were there any other things that your family would raise? Or sell?

JC: Yeah, Dad had a string of dairy cows. [pause] He hated them. He was raised on a ranch where they raised beef. But we sold the cream, and it was a constant source of income. He was absolutely delighted when he could see his way fit financially to get rid of those blankety-blank critters and establish his modest-sized beef herd. As far as type of grain is concerned, I guess you name it. We grew it. Oats, barley. Let's see. Anything else? Mostly oats and barley. Oh yeah, and of course wheat. Dabbled in raising sugar beets for a bit. Had some field corn. But then with the establishment of the beef herd, the land was converted to hay fields and pasture. Yeah, that's the way it was and remains pretty much to this day.

Oh, yes, I forget the horses. When Dad brought the family over in 1938, he brought workhorses with him. Didn't have a tractor. In fact, the tractors were somewhat of a rarity. The neighbors had a tractor, but they also had horses for most of the field work. That was a great experience for me in that during haying, I would drive a team of horses for mowing and for raking. The mowing of the hay with a team of horses was deadly dull. Very slow and very laborious as far as the horses were concerned. Raking the hay was a pleasure in that instead of the horses just plodding along, you could get them going at a pretty good pace. There were many times I'd be going along and imagine that I was driving a sulky in a race, which was fun. But that was certainly an experience that I treasured being able to get in on farming with horses. When the neighbors decided they weren't going to farm anymore, my father purchased that tractor from them, which we used. I suppose that established my dislike for driving a tractor. I found it very boring and still do. I don't get a kick out of that at all. There are other aspects of farming and ranching that I truly enjoy, but that's not one of them.

LC: [laughs] Interesting. Earlier, you mentioned going to school at Hell Gate, and that it was either one or two rooms at the time. I'm wondering, could you tell me about what school was like for you?

JC: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it from the get-go. Liked it a lot. The teachers, I think, were good. I think they were good. My second-grade teacher, Elizabeth Jetty—because I entered as a second grader with my mother, as I mentioned, having homeschooled me, and I was getting along fine. But I do recall that one day I apparently wasn't working up to snuff. She said, "Jimmy, if you don't do better, you're gonna have to go back to first grade." She really got my attention. The other teacher I had was Mabel Jones. We referred to her as Ma Jones. She was an older woman and a little bit cantankerous, and I thought that she picked on my brother. My brother was not

as academically inclined as was I. So, I didn't like what Ma Jones was doing. I remember distinctly sitting at the desk—we all had these desks with our pencils and the pencils had this octagon shape. If you took that pencil and put it in the pencil holder on the desk and rubbed your hands over it, it made a horrible noise. So, when I was feeling angry with Ma Jones and her back was to me when she was on the chalkboard, I would do that, which wasn't nice at all. One day she kept me in for lunch. I didn't get to go out for recess, and I just treated it nonchalantly and sat there eating lunch. She finally said, "Ah, Jimmy, get out of here and go outside."

But I got a really good education there. One thing that I remember about Ma Jones was that she tried to teach us a little Spanish, which I liked a lot.

The outlying elementary schools—to pass the 8th grade, you had to go into the county building, and they had a test that they had to pass in order to be promoted to high school. When I was an 8th grader, I think there were maybe two or maybe even three other students of my age level, but there were a couple of others that were repeating the 7th grade or something like that. For some reason, probably because at least one of them was 15 years old, the teacher had them take the 8th grade exam, and they passed it. I think she just clapped her hands, and she got rid of them.

LC: That's funny. Done! Were there any particular subjects you liked learning about?

JC: Well, I was really taken with history. I certainly liked math in grade school. They didn't really teach much science. But I remember I was so intrigued by the history, the stories of the Spanish conquistadors that took over Mexico and Peru, etcetera. I remember one day I came home one day and said to Mom, "Are we Spanish?" [laughs] My mother knew that I really wanted to be Spanish, so she said, "Oh, yes." Of course, now I have a far different view and am not very impressed with what the Spanish did and [unintelligible]. But then, yeah. High school was different a story as far as subject matter was concerned.

Dad said, "Now I think that you could go either to Frenchtown or Missoula County High School." It just about broke my heart when he said that.

He said, "What's wrong?"

I told him, "I don't want to go to Frenchtown."

"Why not?"

"They don't play football there." So, that was how that decision got made. It was, of course, a very small school. Missoula County High School had at that time, oh, little in excess of 1,000 students. Yeah. I absolutely loved it, absolutely loved it. I loved mathematics. I liked history. I loved science and had good instructors. Interestingly enough, when I look back on it, my two favorite high school teachers were old-maid math teachers. They were excellent. Just

absolutely excellent. I really liked my biology teacher, and the chemistry teacher had a reputation for teaching a course that was similar to college courses. It was okay. I liked physics, but I liked all of the sciences. My father had suggested that I take drafting, which I took as a freshman. I didn't particularly like it, nor was I particularly skilled. I ended up with a B for the first semester, which was the only semester graded B that I received in my high school career

LC: That's pretty impressive.

JC: Yeah. Yeah. But the second year, although the drafting teacher was a nice old guy, but you will remember when I say old guy, I thought the history teacher was truly old. He may have been 35.

LC: You mentioned that it was really, it was important to your dad that you did well in school. Why was that important for him?

JC: Dad was a very intelligent guy, and I think he would have, had he had the opportunity, he'd loved to have gone to college. He didn't get that opportunity. So, while he wanted his boys to go to college, and this may have been one of the reasons why he moved to Missoula. Yeah.

LC: I'm curious. In general, what kinds of values do you feel you gained from your upbringing?

JC: An extremely strong work ethic. That's what Dad expected. It was good. It was a good lesson. Excellent lesson. One of the things I truly treasure is the experiences that I had living on a farm-ranch with exposure to the different domestic animals, to the wildlife that was present, and the diversity of the wildlife. At that particular time, we had bull snakes. Bull snakes are pretty good-sized snakes. They are constrictors, and they would slither down the ground squirrel holes and grab them and bring them on up to squeeze them and chomp on them. They definitely help control the ground squirrel population. A family of foxes would raise their kits on the place year after year. Curiously enough, there were very few deer that we saw on the property.

I certainly enjoyed the diversity of the birds. At that particular time, magpies were considered a pest bird. The ranchers didn't like them because magpies, after cattle were branded, would sometimes land on their back and peck at the scabs, and they didn't like that. The Fish and Game, interestingly enough, decided that the numbers of magpies should be controlled because they were egg eaters. They would find the nests of game birds—ducks and pheasants. So actually, they paid kids to kill the magpies. You were asked to bring their feet in, and you got paid—I don't know—a nickel a pair or something like that. You bring them to this sporting goods place and drag those out, and then they'd give you the money. [laughs] We told our friends, the Baumgardner boys, "Hey, you guys are missing out on an experience here. You could make some good money with that, because they're paying a nickel or a dime"—or whatever it was—"a head for these magpies." Unfortunately, the Baumgardner boys took that

literally, and instead of bringing the legs in, they brought in the heads. They got thrown out of the store.

I continued shooting magpies for some time. I was in the hayloft of the barn, and we had just finished flood irrigating this field just to the west of the house. The magpies would come into those flooded fields so I would sit up there in the hay loft and shoot the magpies. I went over to pick one up, and as I picked it up, I noticed that it had regurgitated a large number of grubs. I thought, 'Oh, no, I've been shooting a friend,' because these grubs, of course, were feasting on the roots of the plants. That was the last magpie I ever shot. I look at them today, of course, as being a valuable part of the ecosystem, and in order to make that determination, you have to know what their niche is. So, living on a farm-ranch, you start to make these connections.

LC: You mentioned the work ethic and the value of this species diversity. Were there any other values you felt like you gained from your upbringing?

JC: Well, in my magpie story, I started making the connections—the understanding of how nature works and how one thing, one organism, can influence everything else. A life-lasting realization. As I went on in my university studies, then it was so much easier to start looking for dots to connect.

LC: Let's talk about that. Did you go right to the university after high school?

JC: Right. Yeah, I did. Most of the graduating members of my class would do that. There are some, the privileged few, who would go out of town or out of state. Most of us went to the University in Montana.

LC: And what was that like?

JC: A whole different experience from high school. In a number of ways. The subjects were more sharply focused, which was good. The exposure to students from different parts of Montana was good. The social cohesiveness was certainly not as intense as it was in high school, although when I look back at it, I know that there were different groups and different cliques of students at the high school level. That's certainly true at the university level as well. The first semester at the university went by extremely well. I had always been with so enamored with studying this discipline and that discipline that I didn't need to think about where's this going to get me. But at the university level, my advisor—I had decided I would major in zoology. Why? Because I loved it. But my advisor kept saying, "Why are you taking this? Why are you doing this? You're not gonna stick with this." Now this was early on. I now realize that he was trying to get me to think ahead as to what will a degree in zoology, what are some of the options? But he never said that. It raised some doubts in my mind. So very shortly I decided, "Okay, I'll go for chemistry." One of the things that appealed to me about chemistry is that it was seemingly less complex and more "pure," perhaps.

LC: In what sense?

JC: In what sense that, well, you didn't have all of these interactions. There are rules and laws in chemistry that are very straightforward. Zoology, biology is not that way. I didn't stay there very long, because I thought that, now if you really want to get down to the fundamental truths, which I was unknowingly searching for, you go to physics. So, I stayed in physics through my junior year. It involved, of course, lots of math. But I decided, before my senior year that, you know, I really like working with people, and I don't think I'm going to get that if I stick with physics. So, my senior year I switched over to psychology and took all of the courses required to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in psychology, which was very different. Now, during my entire undergraduate work, I was in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. Why? Because it kept me from being drafted. This was during the Korean War, and I wanted to get my college education. So, that's what I did. When I graduated, however, I was committed to two years active service in the army. I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for the basic infantry officer's school. I went down as a second lieutenant, of course.

LC: Was that while you were in school?

JC: No. That's upon graduation. Between my junior and senior year, I attended a month-long summer camp. But before I left for Fort Benning, I had a very, very serious girlfriend, and I didn't want to leave her behind. So, before we went down, we got married and went down together. Now we found in that company of the second lieutenants—I forget how many were there, hundred or so—practically everyone in the class had done the same thing. They had come there with their new wives. About 80 percent of the members of that particular company were West Point graduates. The rest of us were from ROTC. That was different to be exposed to them. It was very interesting.

LC: What was different about them?

JC: Well, they should have been the elite because they came from West Point where you were trained to be a soldier for a career. And some of them showed that elitism. Some of them didn't. One of our new, good friends, great guy, great guy. But it was the diversity of background. They weren't just a bunch of country small-town hicks. So that was different. Interestingly enough, upon graduation, six of the ten honors students were not West Pointers. I found that interesting.

LC: After your training there, what did you do afterward?

JC: I might have had the option of requesting overseas duty. But for some reason, my wife and I were a little frightened by that. I had the opportunity to remain at Fort Benning, and we did that. I don't think it was a good choice looking back on it, because going overseas where some of our friends went would have opened our lives, but we didn't take advantage of that. The

remaining part of the two years, pretty, rather mundane post service, which was not particularly challenging.

I might add, however, that since Fort Benning is just out of Columbus, Georgia and right across the river is Phenix City, Alabama, the experience of living in the South was an eye-opener. We had never, ever experienced segregation. It was, wow!, something else. We could not believe that it actually existed.

LC: What was it like?

JC: [laughs]

LC: Well, what do you remember about it?

JC: We took the train down to Fort Benning. When we got to the South and stopped for a short break at the train stations, here were water fountains that were labeled "colored only." Here were restrooms that also had the same designation. Couldn't believe it. Then when we got down to Fort Benning and found a place to live, to spend the remaining part of the two years. It was a very small, little mobile-home community. Strictly whites. Strictly, strictly. We went to a little Methodist church in walking distance from the mobile-home park. Of course, strictly whites. When you walk down the streets of Columbus or Phenix City, if you were walking on the sidewalk and approaching you from the other direction were blacks, as you got closer, they immediately stepped in the gutter. As we went through the colored parts of town, very small, unpainted houses with no lawn, no fences, TV antennas sticking out the top and a pretty decent looking car out in front. The schools were segregated. The black schools—no grass on the playgrounds, the windows often broken. It was unreal from our experience.

I remember distinctly when we attended a church service prior to the exhibition baseball game that was going to be played in Columbus that coming week. Let's see. It was New York Giants and maybe the Cleveland Indians, okay. Willie Mays was the giant that was just out of this world, and we were going to that game. But at this church service, the pastor got up, and after his little sermon, he said, "Now I want you people to know, I don't care what color that man's skin is, I'm going to see Willie Mays play." We wanted to stand up and applaud. We went to the game. The baseball field, just the other side of the fence, was the site of these pathetic homes where the blacks live. Willie Mays didn't play. But Monte Irvin, who was another black man, hit the winning home run over the fence into the dingy town, which we thought, 'Ooh that's cool. That's cool.'

Later on, my company commander, he and his wife had a black maid who would come and do the housecleaning and whatnot. One week they had neglected to give her the paycheck, and they realized, 'Ooh, she really needs that.' So, they drove into the shanty town where she lived and delivered the check, which she appreciated. The captain said to her, "Why don't you people paint the houses?"

She said, "Captain, we had a fellow nearby. He did paint that house. I tell you, it looked as nice as any white man's house. They burned it down."

Well, when my wife and I left for Montana, we drove the pickup that I had purchased down there because I thought it would be a good vehicle for the farm that I hoped to work when we got home. Built a container in the back of it for our luggage, and then stopped all the way back. My wife had relatives in Minnesota, and I had relatives, of course, in eastern Montana, etcetera. We said to each other, "Whew! It is going to be so good to get back to Montana where this prejudice doesn't exist." Wow, did we have an awakening, because every place we stopped, we'd bring up the subject, and guess what? All of our relatives, to a person, were closet segregationists. They didn't see anything wrong with what was going on. Good heavens! Realized that I shouldn't have been surprised because we don't do a very good job at our relationship with the Native American tribes here. But that was different exposure. Yeah.

LC: Yeah. So, around this time when you came back, was that when you used your G.I. Bill entitlement?

JC: Okay. Really wanted to farm, but we found out quickly that even back then, unless you had parents who were financially capable of helping you get started, a young family really couldn't find farmland then. So that door seemed to be closed. This farm-ranch where I grew up and where I still live, very modest size for Montana. It will support one family and do so very modestly. I know my parents were extremely comfortable with doing without a lot of things. So, wanting to do something as far as agriculture is concerned, I decided, 'well, there's an alternative. I think I'll go over to Bozeman to MSU and get a graduate degree in animal husbandry.' Because there are jobs available at some experiment stations where you can be a manager. I thought, 'hey, I think I'll take the GI Bill, and I'll do that.' So, we went over there and declared an intention to work on a graduate degree in animal husbandry. [laughs] But the ag department would have required me to take all these mickey-mouse, extremely low-level ag courses before they would even consider letting me get into graduate studies. I was very disappointed. I talked it over with my wife, and she said, "You know, you might think about teaching." And I thought, 'By golly, maybe so.'

I went over to the Zoology Department, and the advisor that I was assigned had been a former high school biology teacher. He said, "Jim, we have a program here where you can earn your master's degree preparing you to teach, rather than writing a thesis. You can take the additional coursework that you'll need. You'll have to take the minimum number of education courses. You can get your teaching certificate, your master's degree in zoology, and you're off." So that's the direction I took. The subject matter, I loved, of course, and blissfully I didn't have to take many education courses since they were, in my opinion, rather mickey-mouse stuff. Then was ready to enter the teaching field. I was a graduate assistant, so I got a little touch of it at the university level. Obviously, nothing like teaching high school, but, yeah.

LC: If the education courses were maybe a little easy for you, what about your graduate studies helped prepare you?

JC: Graduate studies—those courses were subject matter entirely. Entirely, entirely. As you can probably see, I had gone full circle. From my freshman year at the University of Montana when I first said, "zoology," then I ended up getting a degree in zoology. The subject matter I loved and tied with the outdoor experiences that I had through growing up on a farm-ranch. Everything was kind of flowing together.

LC: I think maybe now would be a good time to just if you could give me a brief synopsis of your teaching career like where you worked and which grades and subjects you taught.

JC: Yes. My first teaching job, which I obtained immediately after graduation was at Havre. Havre had a good-sized high school for that time—500 students. My assignment there was, I think, four classes of biology and one of algebra. I'd always loved mathematics, and I was told I'd be teaching all biology classes in the future. Really liked Havre, liked the people there, loved the size of the school, because I knew that by the time a particular class had graduated I would know every student in that school, and that appealed to me. That really appealed to me. I got to design my curriculum aided by the biology textbooks that every student had, etcetera. It was a tremendous amount of fun. Really enjoyed it just right from the get-go. Interestingly enough, I almost immediately instigated one of the teaching techniques that my high school biology teacher used that I admired, which was a daily quiz—a daily short quiz over the assignment. I had been impressed with that. And so [unintelligible] I liked it. I used that substantially throughout my teaching career. I loved the interaction with the students. I realized immediately that every student in that class is an important person worthy and [unintelligible] of individual recognition. It was a blast. We planned to stay there for, well, maybe indefinitely. In fact, I had signed a teaching contract for the next year when a new friend that we had made there in Havre—a young couple who had been there for a couple of years—said, "I have an opportunity to be interviewed for a position in Missoula. We know that's where you're from. Would you like to ride down with us?"

So, we said, "Oh, of course." We went with Andy and his wife to the superintendent's office and sat down in the waiting room. While Andy was having his interview, well, the superintendent had come out, he had seen us and he said, "Jim, it's good to see you." He was the superintendent that was there when I was in high school. Andy got through his interview, and he came out and he said, "Well, I got the job."

Superintendent Berry came out and said, "Jim, come on in here and talk. I got a job for you."

So, I went in. "What?"

He said, "Okay, I'd really like you on the staff, and this coming year you'd be teaching two classes of chemistry and two of practical math."

I said, "That's not what I want teach. I want to teach biology."

He said, "I guarantee you the next year you'd be teaching biology."

Well, with that opportunity to return to Missoula, it wasn't something that we could possibly turn down. So, we said, "Yes, I like that. But there is a problem. I've already signed a contract for Havre." I said, "I'll see if they'll let me off. And if so, we'll be back." They did, begrudgingly, but they did. In fact, it was funny. I was the mentor of the science club there at Havre and had arranged for a field trip that would require a bus and asked the principal superintendent if they'd give us a school bus for that. I'd done that before we got down to Missoula. Came back and went in and told them that I had a chance to return to my hometown and I'd really like to be released from contract, and they were bit grumpy about it. Then the next day or so, I went in and said, "Well,"—I forget exactly how this went, but something like, I had gone in not to ask them for that, but if I could get the bus. When I walked in to ask about the bus and said something like, "Have you made a decision?"

They said, "Yeah, we'll let you have your contract," and that's not what I was going to ask them. But that took care of it, of course, and we came back here.

For the first three years—after the first three years you get tenure and certainly enjoyed every minute of it. When we realized that I would be finishing my teaching career here—we had been renting a house uptown—we started looking around for a place to buy. My father said, "We've got this little chunk of land there at the northwest corner of the place. I don't use it for anything. You can have it to build a house on if you want it." Took us about 10 seconds to make up our mind.

LC: Really?

JC: Yeah. We just absolutely jumped at that. So, that's how we ended up back on the land where I grew up. Yeah. Coming here, you passed that house that we built. It's now owned by my son and his family, and he brought up his kids there.

LC: Wow, wow! [pauses] That's really cool. It didn't take it into you more than 10 seconds to decide you were ready to come back.

JC: Oh, absolutely. I mean, it was the greatest opportunity in the world. Not only to live at a corner where I grew up, but also—and this was very important—I could be involved in the farming and ranching operation. Not that with a modest size of the property that Dad needed a lot of help. At least we would be there. And on these few acres that we would now own, we could practice agriculture independently from what Dad was doing on the remainder of the ranch. Indeed, that's what we did. The kids were all in 4-H with different projects. My oldest son had a small band of sheep. The second son had two Jersey milk cows, which furnished milk

for the family. The third son raised hogs. The first daughter had, let's see, I think she had hogs, the occasional sheep, and of course, was involved in sewing and cooking. Our last child, our daughter, did the same thing.

We had chickens, had quite a good-sized flock. They were brown, and chickens that raised the brown eggs that somehow look healthier. Sold those eggs to teachers at high school, and then during the summertime would sell them at the farmer's market. I converted a large chunk—it was a bit less than an acre, I'm sure—to a vegetable garden and raised all kinds of vegetables and sold them during the summertime at the first, and only, farmer's market here in Missoula. This was done on a bi-weekly basis, Saturday morning for sure, and then—when was the second one, was it Tuesday or Wednesday, I don't know—but we'd bring the produce in there, had your table, and sell that. Sometimes there would be leftovers, and I established a relationship with a restaurant that would buy the lettuce, for example, etcetera. We sold the eggs at the farmer's market too when the teacher-customers were not available during the summer. My wife sold bread, home baked bread at the market, and she got to the point where she would bring—oh my gosh how many loaves of bread—50 or more. Just wow. Yeah. We had a few specialty crops—raspberries. Before the bell, when the customers saw we had raspberries, there'd be a line.

LC: What was the bell?

JC: Oh, the bell that started the market. The bell that started the market. Then you could do it. Within a brief period of time, the raspberries were gone. Some of the odd specialty crops were interesting. Kale, which I'm not particularly fond of, but I always brought some kale for sale. There were a few folks who really liked that kale, so they'd come by. That was a really, really fun experience—the farmer's market, dealing with the people. My daughters were asked to sell—what? Something concerning the farmer's market, which they loved doing. So it was good. [telephone rings in background] The kids all had their farm chores. Those they could do in the morning—the chores they do in the morning. Then they had the afternoons essentially free—do whatever they wanted to. The girls and son Joel had horses, and they could ride all over the place. The girls had the girlfriends who would ride over on the island, just all over, and then go swimming, etcetera. They became very good riders, of course. Son Jon became an expert fisherman. Son Joel got together with Dad, and he had a few horses that he trained. Son Jay got a dairy goat and raised her for milk. But he also convinced the Lake County Extension Service to start a 4-H goat project, which they hadn't had before, and they did—goat's milk. He and I really liked the goat's milk. The rest of the kids turned up their noses at it. However, at one time or another we'd all have a glass of milk for breakfast or something like that, I would substitute for one of them instead of drinking the jersey milk that they were usually used to, and they'd drink it. Then afterwards, I'd say, "How was your milk tonight?"

"Oh, it was good."

"That was goat's milk."

"Ew! I knew there was something funny about it!"

[laughs] Of course, they didn't know.

LC: Right? It wasn't bad when they drank it.

JC: Yeah. But that was a great experience. The kids got—they learned an awful lot. Each one of them to this day have a marvelous work ethic. They also have a deep appreciation for the world around them. In other words, pretty much the kind of life I had when I was growing up. Of course, as my father got older and the kids did too, then they helped him out a lot on the ranch. Of course, the entire family delighted every spring in attending the branding party that Dad would have here. Adhering to the tradition of the good old days. The calves were branded. The bull calves were castrated. They were given shots, vaccinations. Son Jon, I think, and his girlfriend, then his wife Patti, who now live down in the house that you came by—yeah, that's where they're at—they were good ropers. They would rope the calves by the hind feet, of course, and drag them across the corral where a couple of folks would be waiting to flip them over on their side and hold them down while branding occurred. Of course, that was always a blast. It was kind of a celebration. Not particularly enjoyable for the calves, and it really upset the cows. But it was fun. And great for them to have gotten a taste of ranch life.

LC: What was it like for you to come back after your time away?

JC: It was a tremendous relief. It was, "Wow! I get the opportunity to come back home." This little valley—I know every nook and cranny of it. I know what's going to happen with the season changes. I love the cottonwood trees, the chokecherries, the hawthorns, the aspen, the elderberries. It was a marvelous opportunity to come back home and to become the caretaker, the steward, for this property that I find so special.

LC: Was your wife from this area as well?

JC: My wife grew up in Ronan. She was working as the secretary for the county extension agent. At that time, I was a 4-H leader. Not quite...yeah, yeah, kind of a leader I guess, and still associated with the 4-H club. I came into the extension office, and the extension agent introduced me to his secretary. I thought she looked pretty nice. So, I started dating her. We just clicked. It was marvelous. To the extent I went with her during my entire senior year at the university. As I mentioned earlier, I couldn't leave her behind when I went to Benning. Joanne loved home life, and this is what she wanted to do. She wanted to be a homemaker. She wanted to have the five kids. She wanted to have three boys and then two girls. That's the way it went. She was an absolutely marvelous homemaker, which was wonderful. Except once all the kids were gone, she had been an excellent secretary, but she was then at an age where people didn't hire, and she was out of that. So, that wasn't good. That aspect of it wasn't good. But she had a wonderful life, was a wonderful companion.

When she was 37 years old, she developed diabetes—diabetes 1. If you get to be that old, you're not supposed to get it. Diabetes 2, yeah, you can get it as you get older. I knew that it would probably shorten her life somewhat, but 15 years later she died from complications of that, which was unbelievably devastating. I was, however, fortunate to find another wonderful woman. Next year. Next year? Yeah, we will have been married for 30 years. Yeah. First marriage lasted for 35. So, I am a very fortunate person to have been able to have found and shown the uncommon good sense of marrying two wonderful women.

LC: It must have been very helpful to be here and to have your family close by then.

JC: Yes, and no. My father was gone by that time. My mother was living here. Yes, she was a comfort. But, yeah.

[long pause]

LC: Well, I'd like to come back to some of your teaching experience during that time and just ask you a bit more about how you mentioned earlier that you had quite a few teachers who really influenced you from your mother and the two teachers who you had in grade school and some of your high school teachers. I'm wondering if there are any particular ways that they taught that particularly affected you and impacted the way that you taught?

JC: Yeah, definitely. My math teachers—so exacting, and I loved that. I can remember Ms. Clark when she would write on the chalkboard. If someone would ask kind of a stupid question, she would go to the chalkboard and slash away at it and the chalk would break and her fingers would go on the board and everybody would cringe. But what I got from Ms. Clark was the high expectations that she had. Ms. Speck—very similar. Not quite as dramatic as Ms. Clark. But one of the techniques that that she used was she posted a list after each test to show the ranking of each student in the class. She had it listed by name and that certainly helped stimulate me in doing the best I could. I remember at our 50th class reunion one of my old friends from high school said, “Jim, remember that competition that we had to see who would be at the top of the list?” I used that when I was teaching, but I didn't want to put names up there so every student had a number of their choice. But I would list that. I found that helpful. I mentioned that the biology teacher would use the daily quizzes. But little things like that.

Plus, these were all experts in their field whether it was mathematics or science. I found that extremely important. Of course, I had that background in science and in math. When I was science department chair at the high school here and would be instrumental in hiring replacements to the department, that's one of the things that I would look for. At the time that I retired, every science teacher on staff had a graduate degree in their field of study. I recall a couple of years ago *Scientific American* had an article on the characteristics—training, etcetera—that were required to have exemplary science teachers, and that was the number one thing they found. You had to have the expertise in the background. I'm a little disappointed

in the trend that seems to be existing today in that teachers go out with a broad field major—science teachers—meaning that they can teach any of the sciences. I see a problem with that because their understanding of each one is too shallow.

LC: I see. You have this background and this upbringing in agriculture. I'm wondering if that was something you ever brought into your teaching, either taking students outside the classroom or just talking about farming or like the diversity that you saw through agriculture, if you ever brought any of that into your teaching.

JC: I suspect that it would largely have been incidental, but a vital, a vital part, I thought of their education—field trips. Field trips to different areas of the environment—essential. Hands-on activities in the labs. Having the ability that when we would talk about different ecosystems, for example, having experience firsthand at what the wildlife would be in many of these. As far as specifically teaching agriculture not really. Not really. But all the things that I had learned in growing up on the farm and in my studies was to know what the connections are. This is vital for complete understanding. I started learning those connections on the farm. I continued making those connections when I was in graduate school. So, I would say the farm background helped me a lot. Not for, say, particular things about agriculture but for passing on the connections that can be made.

LC: I'm curious—in addition to the way that farming and your experience growing up here influenced your teaching—I'm wondering if you saw any connection between your work as a teacher and your work as a farmer. Did these two pieces, I guess, speak to one another during your time doing both?

[pause]

JC: Sorry for the pause here.

LC: That's okay. Would it be helpful for me to restate?

[pause]

JC: Okay, here are a couple of things that I'd noted. This may be a bit repetitious, but as I was looking over these questions, there are some things that I jotted down. So, bear with me if it's a little repetitious. I think I already stated that when you grow up on a farm it opens your eyes to the natural life around you. This is critical for teaching because it provides specific examples of everyday biological observations that a student, or anyone, can make if they know what to look for. Perhaps a follow-up on that, I was a 4-H leader for 20 years. Prior to that time when I was a kid growing up, I was a 4-H member for 10 years, but for 20 years a 4-H leader and working with students who have different kind of projects. In order to assist them, you need to hone teaching skills that are applicable to classroom teaching. You were working with 4-H kids of all different kinds of abilities, and you could adjust your teaching style to best help them. Well,

that 4-H farm background, etcetera, is directly transferred to, well, I think to be extremely important in the classroom.

LC: I want to ask you a bit about when you decided to retire from teaching and if you could talk a bit about making that decision.

JC: It was an unexpected decision, an unexpected decision. It was the summertime, and I had just returned from a wonderful, wonderful camping-fishing trip in Alaska that son Jon had arranged. I had some hay on the ground, and when I got back, I was working with that. I developed some severe abdominal pain. I consulted with a doctor friend of son Jon, who said, "Well, why don't you follow this procedure?"

I said, "Well, I'm going to go with my wife to"—she was a mortgage banker—"to a conference that she's attending. Should I be okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, that will be fine."

I wasn't fine. We got to Boise, Idaho, and I had pains that were terribly severe. Earlene rushed me to the hospital, and they took an analysis and decided an intestine had ruptured and that immediate operation was mandatory. I remember asking the doc, "Well, can't we go back to Missoula for this?"

[laughs] He took a step backward and said, "Jim, it's like this. You've got one foot in the grave and the other's on a banana peel. You've gotta have this done now," which he did successfully. But I ended up with a temporary colostomy, which was to be redone in perhaps six months. I guess it was a near-death experience. When we got home, I realized that I wasn't gonna be able to teach for the first semester and that after that, I would be going at—I didn't think I would be doing the job that I felt that I should be doing. I was 65 at the time and I decided, 'well, maybe something's telling me that it's time to retire,' which I did unexpectedly. I would love to have taught for maybe another five years. Looking back, I'm not sure I made the right decision at the time, but then I found other ways to compensate for being out of the classroom.

LC: I know that one of the ways you have compensated for that is continuing to mentor student teachers in Missoula. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about why you got involved in mentorship and why you continue to be involved with that now.

JC: Yes. When I knew I wasn't going to be teaching anymore, I told Earlene I was seriously thinking about running for the school board. She said, "You know, I'd think carefully about that," which I did. I realized that although I love teaching and I took on the responsibility of being department chair because I knew that somebody needed to do it and I felt that I could do that in a way that would lobby for the best needs of the teachers with whom I worked, but it wasn't fun dealing with the administration. That was the thing that I found least likable about teaching. I, thinking back about the school board, thought, 'Oh yeah, I would probably put

myself in an opposition predicament with the administration from the get-go.' That would not be fun. Then I also remembered that during my teaching career, I acted as a cooperating teacher for student teachers, which I enjoyed a lot, and which I felt was a professional responsibility to take on that task. It was great. However, I also remembered that each student teacher was also assigned a university supervisor who would come in, observe the teaching of the student teachers, sit down with them, etcetera. And that, to a person, over all of those years, with one exception, I was not impressed with those university supervisors at all. Because again, with one exception, none of them had ever taught at that level. They had taught at the university level. They hadn't taught there. They didn't know what it was like to be in the trenches. So, I called the University of Montana Education Department and said, "Hey, if you could use someone to observe student teachers in science, I'm now available." [telephone rings in the background] I've been doing that now for 21, 22 years. It has been a great experience, a great experience from this standpoint—that I am impressed by the young people who are going into science teaching now. They're, for the most part, well educated in the science background and are dedicated in working with students at that level. So that is exciting. I enjoy it. It gets me back in the classroom, and it has also got me into the classrooms of so many schools here in western Montana. When you're actually teaching, you don't get to do that. For the most part, I've been encouraged by the quality of teaching and of the school facilities in science that I've observed throughout this region. It's good.

LC: Well, I want to thank you, Jim. It's been really good talking with you, and I'm looking forward to keeping our conversation going later this week. Thank you.

JC: Well, and thank you for listening to my rambling. I appreciate it.

[End of Interview]