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Interviewee: Julia (Julie) Osborn

Interviewer: Beth Hodder

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Note: This interview was recorded by telephone. The interviewer had the recorder, which is why her voice is so much louder than the interviewee's.

Beth Hodder: Hi. I am Beth Hodder, a member of the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association. Today, November 5, 2016, I am interviewing Julie Osborn, Julia by name, and she is one of two daughters of Joe Osborn, who was the Spotted Bear lookout back in 1948, I believe. Spotted Bear is with the Flathead National Forest. Julie is answering these questions in lieu of her parents. These are questions that she feels she has information from when they were working there. So, Julie can you tell us about your parents and where they grew up?

Julia Osborn: Surely. My father, Joe Osborn, was born in Muncie, Indiana and lived there all his life until he went to Purdue University. After he had been at Purdue, he worked for a while in Indiana, but when World War II came around, as he was a Quaker—a member of the Society of Friends—and a Conscientious Objector, he would not enlist in the war effort but instead joined the CPS, Civilian Public Service, and volunteered to work as a smokejumper. I don't think he had been west of Chicago before that time, so his experience being in Montana was very new to him, and he fell in love with the Rocky Mountains and the West. During the war years he was a smokejumper, jumped out of Missoula, and his name is in the flight jump logs there at the [Smokejumper] Museum.

BH: Do you know what years he jumped out of there?

JO: I can't remember. It would be during the war, towards the end of the war, but I'm not positive, but what I can tell you is that he was one of the oldest smokejumpers, and so he got the nickname of Pappy. They all called him Pappy.

BH: [Laughs] This young guy.

JO: The young guy. Yes, they were in their late teens or early twenties, I guess. He had been born in 1911, so he was one of the oldest guys there. What I do know about it was that he did go on several jumps and he, interestingly enough, had a real fear of heights and he had it for the rest of his life. He wouldn't talk too much about what it was like to jump out of a plane, and I pressed him once. They were in a Ford Tri-Motor and apparently the spotter would signal each guy when it was time to jump and if they didn't actually jump, I think they got pushed. So, when I asked him what it was like to get ready for his turn to jump, he just kind of groaned and he said, "Well, a lot of guys were getting sick." I guess they were all pretty nervous about jumping

Julia (Julie) Osborn Interview, OH 435-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.

out of that plane and I'm quite sure that he was. Having said that, though, he did the jump and he didn't get hurt. They had done a lot of practicing, and I think it was at Missoula, using trampolines and towers. They learned how to drop and roll, and they also learned how to cut themselves out of trees if their parachute would hit a snag. So, I think those were the main concerns, was that they would get hung up in a snag or if they would wrench an ankle or break it if they didn't roll correctly once they landed. As far as I know, he never had any problems with that. I think when he was on the ground he was fine.

He talked about fighting fires. I think he liked it, actually. I think he liked being out there and working with other guys that created fire line, trenches, and the like. He certainly learned to cook. There was a cookbook that the smokejumpers used. He cooked out of it for the rest of his life. He was just enamored of some of the recipes. So that was one aspect of their smokejumping experiences.

He certainly did a lot of hiking, because they would have to hike out, and when I was a young child, he would take me hiking, and if I would complain that I was getting tired, he would always say to me, "Well, we always said in the Forest Service, you just don't stop walking, you just walk a little slower." That was his approach to getting tired, so I imagine he learned that there.

BH: When he was a smokejumper, was it part of his duties to work as a lookout, or did he volunteer for that later?

JO: He volunteered for that later. After the war he came back East. He got a job at Lehigh University as a professor. He taught Engineering: Stress, and Strength of Materials. He met my mother who taught at Moravian College for Women, and she taught English. Bethlehem [Pennsylvania] was settled by Moravians, and they had a strong presence there and a college for men and a college for women. So she taught at Moravian College for Women and she taught English Literature, and she also was a Quaker. They met at Quaker Meeting and then they became engaged.

After they became engaged my father made it very clear that he wanted to come back to Montana to live. Their first step to do that was to sign up to work on a lookout for their honeymoon. So they got married and drove West in an old Model T Ford and came to some base camp, because they obviously didn't drive their Ford to Spotted Bear. They got to Spotted Bear with a pack train, a combination of horses and mules. My mother was comfortable around horses. She grew up with horses in a kind of farming community in Pennsylvania, so she rode her horse. The pack train carried food and water. My father was not comfortable around horses, so he hiked with the pack train up to Spotted Bear.

BH: When you say Spotted Bear, you're talking about the ranger station at this point, right? Not the lookout itself?

JO: They went to the lookout with the pack train—tthat’s how all their food and water got delivered to them. I'm not clear where they started, but I know they ended up at Spotted Bear Lookout with the pack train.

BH: I do know that people did drive to Spotted Bear Ranger Station, which would have possibly been where he was. One of the reasons I say that is that I was at the ranger station, and that’s how I found about you and your father's photographs, which were absolutely fabulous. There is a photograph that your mother had written below that says, "Joe at Spotted Bear." It's a picture of what is now the museum at Spotted Bear, which was one of the ranger stations at the time, and there were some old automobiles in the background.

JO: Oh, probably one of them might have been his. So probably they did drive there and started there with the pack train.

JO: When they initially went up to the lookout, apparently they had what they needed in terms of food and water, although they were very careful with the water, because it had to be brought in, or at least the initial round was brought in. They decided to collect snow and melt it. My father would go collect it while my mother stayed in the lookout, and then she would melt it.

While they were at the lookout they had to spot—look around—I think once an hour, and they had binoculars, and they had a 360 map so they could identify where they saw smoke and call in locations. Apart from that, they really didn't have too many responsibilities. So, my mother had brought a large number of books with her, being an English Professor, and she spent most of the summer reading, and I think probably writing her reactions to what she was reading. My father, on the other hand, most probably didn’t do that. He tended not to be such a reader. My guess is that he probably would take some time away and hike in the area while my mother would stay and spot for a while. He certainly would bring firewood back and snow back for them.

She told me they had to adjust to high altitude cooking. Everything would rise more than they planned [Laughs]. They baked their own bread. My father developed a real passion for making cinnamon buns from that experience, and he made them pretty much for the rest of his life. He’d make them once a week on Saturday for Sunday morning. He loved making bread. He did that for many years, so that was something he developed there. Apparently, they were sent up a large ham, so they used it certainly for meat and then for soup. My mother liked to make lentil soup, so I think she probably started that while they were up there. My father had a particular affection for different kinds of baked beans, and I have a feeling that was another thing that they created and cooked up there. They didn’t talk too much about their cooking. Neither of them was, beyond what I just told you, particularly interested in cooking. I think it was sustenance cooking more than anything else.

BH: I talked with somebody else who was a lookout at one time, and they said their main diet was spam.

JO: Oh my! That sounds about right, you know. These canned ham products, and probably beans, and probably cornmeal. I remember my father had another affection for cornbread and cornmeal, so I think that was probably the place where that got started, as well.

Mostly my mother talked about reading; she really enjoyed doing the reading and the melting of the snow. She did tell me that her own mother was very nervous about her going out there, very nervous that they would be so far away from anybody else and have intermittent contact with anyone. But they were fine. They enjoyed it. She remembers enjoying it.

From there they moved to Bozeman where my father took a job teaching. He taught Engineering at Montana State, and my mother taught English for half a year maybe, or maybe a full year, but then she got pregnant with me. At that time women were not allowed to teach if they were pregnant, so she retired from teaching but joined a writer's group in Bozeman. They were friends, a number of whom published books subsequently. I don't know all the books they published, but I know one of them was titled *The Mouse-gray Stallion*. I was given a copy as a kid. I read it more than once.

I think the other thing my father might have done that summer, and he did certainly in many subsequent summers, was that he got himself good photographic equipment. I think what you've seen are just snapshots from maybe a little Brownie camera, but he went out and bought high quality equipment, and then he would spend quite a lot of time outside composing photographs, and climb to his favorite peaks, and wait for the sun to reach a particular angle or wait for a particular cloud formation to come in. He spent a lot of time just patiently waiting for the light and natural phenomena to shift so that he could get the photograph he wanted. The photographs I was telling you that I have are not these snapshots but they're more composed, they're black and whites and slides. He might have started it that summer because he certainly had enough time to do it.

BH: You had sent some photographs. I guess they got sent to the smokejumpers, who, because they were related to Spotted Bear, sent them to the Spotted Bear Ranger Station. The photographs are amazingly wonderful. You sent a picture of the very first [Spotted Bear] Lookout, which was a 13'x13' two-story log cabin, and in the foreground of the photo are two horses standing next to the lookout, which was a tower. I believe that must have been the one your parents were probably in at the time, because it would have been brand new. There is a picture of your father walking up this long stairway to get to this lookout.

JO: They were definitely in a tower. There's a photograph of my mother on the steps, and I think she had a bucket of snow or water, one of the two.

BH: She's sitting on the bottom step of the lookout, and she has a big pot, and she's stirring something inside. It was snow, or maybe she was cooking something—it's hard to tell.

JO: I know that my father would bring back large pots full of snow, so it's possible that she was just sitting there and waiting for it to melt rather than putting it on the fire.

BH: There's a picture you also sent, it's of your mother, and she's kneeling on the ground, and there's a big pan full of snow and a box next to that. It looks like it must have been very cold, because she's got some gloves on her hands and a scarf on her head, so it's cold and there is snow on the ground. It looks like she is scooping snow with a spoon.

JO: She may well have done that, too. I think when they first arrived there was snow closer to the tower, and as then the summer wore on, I think my father had to go further away to get snow.

BH: How did they keep water?

JO: I had the impression that they had the jugs that came with the horses with the pack train originally, and that this other water that they were melting they were using if they needed to wash their clothes or things like that. I do remember her telling me that some water was brought up to them.

BH: In talking with other people, it seems that pack strings would bring them up water.

You also sent a marvelous photograph of your mother underneath the lookout. There are cross beams and she's hanging laundry out, and it's just flapping away in the breeze.

JO: She did, I think, wash things by hand, and I would imagine she would bring them or maybe my father. My father had extremely strong hands, so strong that when he tightened something by hand, whether it was a faucet on a sink or lug nuts on a car, other people couldn't open it. In my growing up years, we had to really work hard to turn the water on in the house if my father was the last person to the sink. He might have done the wringing out of the clothing for her.

BH: Do you happen to know if they saw any fire activity that summer?

JO: They did see some. They saw some smoke. I don't think they saw big fires, but they saw some small ones. Beyond that, I don't know. They certainly saw lightning strikes. They certainly saw a few fires after the lightning strikes, but my impression was that they were fairly small. Some would spontaneously go out. I think they had to report everything, but I don't know how many fires were big enough that they actually had to send out smokejumpers on them.

BH: Do you know how they reported the fires?

JO: I think they had a radio that they had to call in on at least once a day, and call in anything that they saw. My mother mentioned that the reception wasn't great.

BH: Did they mention any special things that happened to them up there, like something weird or scary?

JO: No, I think my mother in the beginning was surprised by the lightning and unnerved if she happened to be alone in the tower if there were lightning strikes all around and my father was out. She'd always worry about him getting hit by lightning. He didn't.

I don't remember them having any untoward experiences with wild animals. I do remember my mother telling me that there was some horse in the pack train that was very jumpy and fractious, and, because she wasn't somebody who had ridden horses, she got to ride him. She said it was a bit of an ordeal getting up there in the first place on this skittish horse, but I guess it was fine. She didn't fall; it wasn't anything other than just a pain.

I remember them saying it [the lookout] was a very tranquil place to be. My mother particularly liked the fact that she could do all this reading, and I know that she wrote some letters. I think that they got re-outfitted once or twice during the summer, so I think that when that happened, she was able to hand letters over. On the whole, they really didn't have much contact with their family.

BH: Did they see their experience up there in 1948 as something that may have helped them choose to go a particular way in life or made an impression on them somehow? I know they both enjoyed the outdoors, especially your dad.

JO: I would say that my dad carried his experiences with him for the rest of his life, whether it was the lookout or smokejumpers or both. He really loved camping out. He loved hiking in the woods. When I was little—my early years were in Montana—he would put me in a backpack and just hike all through the woods with me in the backpack.

Both of my parents would snowshoe. My brother has my father's original snowshoes. They look like something out of *The Last of the Mohicans*. [My father] really liked snowshoeing. He never learned to ski. He was pretty impervious to the cold, so he would just go out and hike around or snowshoe around. I do have a really lovely photograph that he took of himself out in the woods. He had a bare head, and it looked like a Woolworth [Woolrich?] shirt on over maybe two layers under it, and he looked pretty comfortable. That's the way it was. He really was not affected by cold, and he dearly, dearly loved to be in the woods. That fixed him for the rest of his life, and he would refer back to doing things the way they did in smokejumpers or the way they did in Montana.

Because he was a professor, he would have weeks off in the summer, and he would go spend time in Montana with his friends. He would just go off into the woods and be out of touch. We couldn't call him. We could send mail to a post office box and he would eventually get it, but he would just go off, and he loved that. I'm sure he did a lot of photographs while he was doing that, too. So it affected him for the rest of his life. I think that if he had not gotten himself so established in Lehigh for the second time, I think he would have been happy to go and live in

Montana for the rest of his life. It would have definitely been his preference. As it was, he just went back for summers.

My mother remembers the time fondly but she did not have the strong draw to go back to Montana that he did.

BH: Did she ever come back, too, or that was just his time to get away and be with alone with his buddies?

JO: It was mostly his time. He did much more of it after they separated. They did separate and divorce eventually. Then he really went back often, and he maintained his friendships with people in Montana to the end of his life.

I think her friendships were not quite as deep. I think they were there maybe 3 years together in Bozeman, so she had friends, but not like he did.

He had such fond memories of going into the Bob Marshall Wilderness as a smokejumper and building a bridge. There was a reunion of smokejumpers about 35 years ago, and he got my sister and her husband, me and my husband, and my brother and his girlfriend to go with him. He had arranged to have one of the original packers to take us on a pack trip into the Bob Marshall Wilderness along with many of his CPS buddies. It was crazy. They all forgot that they weren't 20 years old anymore. They were all 70 plus, every last one of them, including Pete, the packer. I often said we should write up a kind of a *Reader's Digest* or *Boys' Life* story about this and ask, "Can you spot the 50 things these people did incorrectly?" It's remarkable we all got out of there okay, except for my sister, whose jaw got broken. She was three months' pregnant and a vegetarian. We got her to the hospital. She had a tiny cut on her jaw so they stitched it, but because her jaw was broken, they wired her shut. Then the dietician had to figure out what to give her as liquid diet to keep her healthy throughout her pregnancy that she could drink through a straw. That was quite the challenge. It all ended well but it was a wild, wild experience.

He loved the West until his dying day in 1991. My mother passed away two years ago. There were 10 years between them. He lived into his 80's and she lived into her 90's.

BH: Your mother's name again?

JO: Rebecca McNees Osborn. She went by Becky, and he went by Joe. His middle initial was C but it didn't stand for anything, just plain C, and did not correspond to a name.

BH: Is there anything you can think of regarding their experience to the lookout that we didn't cover?

JO: No. For both of them it was a really happy experience. For my father it was just one of his many experiences in the West, and he would have gladly had many more. I mentioned to you

that I just have thousands of slides and negatives. I know that some of them are definitely of the places in Montana that he liked. Some of the black and whites are too; maybe they all are. One of my projects going forward is to scan them and see what is there. I imagine there is quite a bit of Bozeman, Bridger Range, Yellowstone, and places like that. When I get it done, I will get in touch with you. If you know of anybody who can digitize them, I would gladly get in touch with them. I'm sure many of them are very beautiful.

BH: Oh, I'm sure that they are, judging from the ones I have seen.

JO: He had an engineer's eye for photography, all about shutter speeds, focal length, using the light meter and waiting for the right alignment of shadows and light. He was very patient and meticulous, and some of them are very nice compositions.

BH: So, we'll keep in touch then. I'm going to end this interview unless there's something else.

JO: I will make sure to share anything I find in these many boxes that I have. Thank you for your interest in this.

BH: Thank you for this wonderful interview, Julie.

[End of Interview]