

Oral History Number: 167-001
Interviewee: Adolph Dale
Interviewer: David Louter
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David Louter: This is an interview with Adolph Dale, at his home in Fairfield, Montana, on October the 4th, 1986, on the Old North Trail. Hi.

Adolph Dale: Hi.

DL: We've talked about the Old North Trail, and I was just wondering if you could tell me a few things about it and your life. Why don't we begin with how long you've lived in the area?

AD: Well, I've lived here since 1915. The first time that I seen the Old North Trail was about 1920. It was plainly visible for a short distance. I don't recall seeing it anywhere else, but this was a short distance out of [unintelligible] Teton Canyon. It was coming from the river, running north to the road that we were traveling to get into the canyon. It was plainly visible, but since then, it's hardly...the only place you can see it is on a slope, where the water has washed the tracks deeper.

DL: How old were you then?

AD: I was about 13.

DL: Were you up there with your family? Working?

AD: No, we had a club that us farms boys who had a project, raising potatoes or whatever, and we had a campout in Teton Canyon. We were taken up there in one of the big county trucks, and they stopped there and showed us this trail.

DL: Do you remember who showed you?

AD: Elmer Cadell (?) was the driver of the truck.

DL: And what was his affiliation with the group?

AD: He was a county worker, and at the time, Bob Clarkson (?) was the county agent.

DL: And they took you boys?

AD: Took us up to the Teton Canyon for an outing.

DL: Was it that south fork of the Teton Canyon in there?

AD: No, this was the north fork.

DL: North fork of the Teton? Well that's interesting. Did you know anything more about this gentleman? Or was that the only time you [unintelligible]?

AD: He's dead now.

DL: Was that all his duties were he worked for the county, and that's all you really knew?

AD: Yeah.

DL: When did your interest in the prehistoric Indians of the area [unintelligible]?

AD: I was impressed with seeing this trail and it was interesting, and I read more about it and heard other people talk about it.

DL: What kind of books did you read, or were there things at the time to read about it?

AD: Well, they were books that historians has talked—

[Telephone rings; break in audio]

DL: Since the phone rang, what books were those again?

AD: They were books by historians that had talked to old Indians that could remember. Now, the Indians didn't have a written language. Their history was handed down from father to son. It might have got changed a little bit now and then. These historians, perhaps, they had to use their best judgement, and I don't think there were two historians that probably got the same meaning out of an interview with an Indian.

[long pause] I did begin to study the Indians. Had an interest in how they lived and where they lived in the winter and where they lived in the summertime.

DL: You want to tell me a date, or something like that, when you first started to get interested in it.

AD: Oh, about in 1940, why—

DL: What'd you do then?

AD: —I studied the geology of this area, to kind of date this thing. About 10,000 years ago, give or take a few thousand, this glacier that come out of the Hudson Bay area and come over big

part of this area started to recede. The water from this area used to drain into the Hudson Bay, but as the glacier receded, the current channel went down to the Gulf of Mexico. So the teepee rings and the travois trail kind of has to date back to that time. It's probably a little less than 10,000 years old.

DL: Do you remember what perked up your interest in studying the trail, or any of the geology of that time?

AD: Well, I had gone to...all the ridges around this area have teepee rings on them, and the Indians in the summertime would live along the water holes and the little lakes. In the wintertime, they'd move back along the rivers, where they had plenty of firewood and water and shelter from the trees. This got me pretty much interested in how the travois trail was used. I don't believe it was used hardly ever at all in the wintertime. It wouldn't even be visible. I'm sure that it was used a lot in the summer. The Asiatics, I guess everybody agrees that the Asiatics came to Alaska and probably spread along the West Coast first. Then later on, after this glacier had receded, that glacier when it was here had backed the water up clean back to the mountains. Certainly, they couldn't have been used at that time. It would have to be after that time.

DL: How'd you come across teepee rings on the ridges and that sort of thing? Were you out—

AD: Oh yes. This area is covered with teepee rings along the ridges and along springs and little water holes. The Indians would move out in small bands in the summertime, so as not to disturb the buffalo so much. They spread out in small bands. They would have teepee rings along the high ridges so they could watch for enemy and where the buffalo was at. Also, to warn their people that were probably in an area where there was water and many more of them.

DL: Do you remember people telling you about how the Indians lived in the area? Or did that come from your studies?

AD: I read about it, and by going out to these different places you could...There's a place along a ridge north of us where on either side of the spring the Indians had lived during the summer. There's about, probably, 1,600 Indians, judging by the number of teepee rings on either side of this spring.

DL: What spring is that called?

AD: It's the spring at [unintelligible]. The antelope and the buffalo and the deer and the elk were out on the prairies in those days, and of course they would probably get some fresh meat once in a while when they come to drink.

DL: Was your interest in all this on the side, like just weekend hobbies, or were you—

AD: Oh yeah. It's just a hobby. I did it on the side on weekends and time off. But I really didn't get too interested in this until about in the '40s.

DL: How old were you in the '40s?

AD: Well, I was in my 30s.

DL: Were you farming then?

AD: Yes.

DL: Out here on the irrigation project?

AD: Yes.

DL: Where has your interest in some old Indian sites taken you? Is there any special places that you found a lot of artifacts, or—

AD: Well, all the ridges around here. All the coulees and the hills, and all the way from here up to the mountains, there's teepee rings that I've found artifacts. There's even piskuns [buffalo jumps]. There were many, many piskuns from the mountains in Sun River Canyon to the Missouri River. I think all of them were on the south side of the river, due to the fact that they would entice the buffalo...The buffalo would be up wind from them, and they would entice the buffalo, get them started moving toward this jump off, and they would place rocks in piles in a V shape and put brush on these rocks to funnel the buffalo into where they wanted them to go. They'd try to entice the buffalo by waving, making them curious. When they got as many as they wanted in this wedge, why, they would scare them and get them to stampede. They'd go over this cliff, and those that weren't already dead would be shot with a bow and arrow or a spear.

DL: Did you find any of those in connection with the old travois trail?

AD: Oh yes. On the [unintelligible] place above the [unintelligible] Crossing, that's where the travois trail crossed the Sun River. There were six different buffalo jumps, or piskuns. They're pretty well washed off now [unintelligible], but there are a lot of artifacts. We think that the people that used this travois trail would probably spend some time to kill buffalo and make some jerky and replenish their food supply and rest before they went on. There's every indication that they have done this around this area.

DL: What do you think of when you think of the Old North Trail? Is it just an old trail that runs through the country, or is it something more to it than that?

AD: Well, I think it was used by the Indians in running back, maybe, 9,000 years. Some of the Asiatics, perhaps, that had come over from Asia into Alaska, at first, they probably settled along the coast, and may have come along east of the Rocky Mountains on this travois trail that was used a lot. So it did make...be a good impression, but it was made by dog travois. The Indians didn't have horses until about 1730, and this is definitely been made by dog travois. The three tracks, oh, were not much over four or five feet wide. I can remember seeing them that first time, about 1920. Now, anymore, it's just almost a V.

DL: Where can you see those?

AD: You can see on the slope that's steep enough, so that the runoff has washed these tracks deeper and made kind of a V shape. If you're looking for this trail and you're travelling, say south, why, you pick the path of least resistance and you'll finally come to it again. That is, if you had a dog travois and traveled the country, you'd pick the path of least resistance. If you do this, you'll find the marking of it where it's washed out.

DL: Would that be because dog travois is more powerful, or the dogs weren't as powerful as horses? They couldn't go anywhere they pleased?

AD: People that travelled along the trail?

DL: Yes.

AD: Well, I would say this, that probably small parties used it a lot. And the reason that they travelled along the timber line, just outside the timber line—

DL: That Rocky Mountain front, there?

AD: Yeah, yeah. The reason they did that was several. There were several reasons. One was, perhaps, for concealment in case they suspected enemy, and another was probably easier hunting and fuel for their fires.

DL: And with the horse, that probably changed everything.

AD: Yeah, with the horse, when they got the horse, they didn't use it very much anymore, because they could travel long distances from almost anywhere. Then, of course, I think war parties probably happened along this trail too. I think that [long pause]...What was their name?

DL: I can't remember. Why don't you tell me about—

AD: —the Flatheads from west of the mountains and the Snake Indians come over to hunt buffalo, and they got into battle with the Blackfeet and the Piegans. I'm sure there were plenty of wars along that trail.

DL: Well, there are some markings today. Say that burial site over on the [unintelligible] Ranch. Have you ever visited that?

AD: Yes I have. I've heard two stories of that. Bruce Neal (?) told me about talking to an old Indian, when he first come into this area, and this old Indian said that the Flatheads had a big battle with the Piegans, and this is what happened...Had a big battle there. Another story that I heard was a smallpox epidemic hit the Indians there and a big part of their tribe [unintelligible].

DL: So in both stories, then, it's a burial site.

AD: Yeah, I kind of believe that it is a—

DL: Probably a [unintelligible].

AD: No. I believe it is a—

DL: Oh, that smallpox.

AD: Smallpox epidemic.

DL: We'll take a break.

[Break in audio]

DL: Well, were you good friends with Arthur Pearson (??)?

AD: Yes. I met Art when I went to high school in Choteau.

DL: And you guys went to high school in Choteau because there was no high school in Fairfield?

AD: Right. Art and I became good friends, and after high school Art homesteaded in this Fairfield area and—

DL: What years were those?

AD: Oh, he homesteaded here in the early '30s, and we became good friends. Art had... must have been in the process of making a raised map of the area from [unintelligible], back in the mountains, almost to [unintelligible]. And he had a lot of this done before I realized it, and—

DL: How long ago was that? When he started that?

AD: That was in the '60s, and it was probably in the early '70s before he and I went out to, you might say, we discovered the travois trail.

DL: And he had a strong interest in looking for the trail?

AD: Yes. He did. Art was making this map, and he wanted to place this travois trail accurately on this map and he asked if I would help him do this. I used to watch Art when he was making this map. He was a perfectionist. He wouldn't use glue. He just made it with layers of paper, and he wouldn't use glue because it would throw his elevation off. I used to watch him, he'd work on that until way out into the night. I just got tired watching him. He was a perfectionist, and everything had to be just perfect.

DL: So this trail, then, had to be perfect as well.

AD: Yes. When we went out to find this trail, he had maps with him—they were ownership maps—and he would mark it down as we come to each place where we could locate where the travois trail had shown on a hillside, within and between those marks. I'm sure we didn't miss it by much over several feet.

DL: Where did he get the idea for the hillsides where it show? Did he just know that already?

AD: Well, for instance, up here at Bruce Neals, where the travois trail crosses the Sun River, it has to come down a hill on each side. Now the crossing across the river is real good. It's a good crossing, good gravel crossing, and it's not up steep banks. But the runoff has washed those tracks into a V on both sides. This shows up along hillsides where the travois trail had been on. There's one place, just east of Haystack Butte, close by Swallow Canyon, where the ground is rolling and you can look in a northerly direction...the ground is rolling and the trail almost looks continuous because the ground is rolling so that you see the marks from this travois trail. And that is the only place we found where it was so visible.

DL: Where did the idea of the ownership maps come in? Did they give you the idea—

AD: Art had bought all kinds of contour maps and ownership maps to get his elevation and the distances in the mountains real accurate.

DL: So the contour map would help him find a natural pathway?

AD: Oh yeah. The area that I helped him on...I mean, helped him...Art, this map that he made, he really did a wonderful job, and he's displayed this map in many different places. I really admired how he could sit there and do this. I know I couldn't do it. I did help him locate the trail. He had probably got an interest in this even before I had.

DL: Way back when you were 13, or—

AD: Well, no. No, back in, maybe, in the '50s and '60s. He had done some of the work. He would get up...For instance, Art met an old timer at Augusta.

DL: Was it an Indian, or—

AD: No. He'd go out with Art Pearson for a day or two, and then Art would pick me up and we'd go out. We'd have to have the permission from all the land owners, and it was quite a job but it was interesting. This trail that we plotted probably run about from Ear Mountain to the north fork of the Dearborn. The north fork of the Dearborn, the Dearborn River—the north fork of the Dearborn—runs pretty deep where the bridge crosses. It's about a quarter of a mile below there that the travois trail crossed, and that's where we finished up.

DL: So did you spend your time walking out in the fields?

AD: Yeah. We traced this entire thing clean over through...We went through Cobbs (?) and through the elk pasture, Bruce Neal's—

DL: The game range.

AD: Yeah.

DL: So what did you do in order to follow the trail?

AD: Well, like I say, we'd find the marks along the hillside in one face, and—we were travelling south—we'd just stand there and look to pick out the path of least resistance, like you would have to do if you had a dog travois [unintelligible]. You just walk that way, and you'll eventually find it again. Because they did take the path of least resistance.

DL: Did Art ever use any of those fancy tools for measuring elevation and whatnot when he was out in the field?

AD: No, not out in the field, he didn't.

DL: In that Greenfield Irrigation Survey book, he has a picture of...or, the Greenfield history book, he has a picture an old rock cairn. Do you remember—

AD: Of a what?

DL: A rock cairn.

AD: Oh yes. There are rock piles here and there, especially on the high places along the travois trail.

DL: Were they more on the west side, or anywhere?

AD: Not necessarily. I think I seen more of them on the east side of the trail. They were never too far away from the trail. They were probably markers that were first put up there when they first started travelling, until the trail got well marked. The only place you can see it now is on the slope, where the rains have washed the tracks deeper into a V shape.

DL: Is there anything different about those rock piles than, say, sheep herders' monuments or anything that you may have noticed?

AD: Well, no. They were just piles of rocks.

DL: Did they look like they come from the same area?

AD: Oh yeah, yeah. They were definitely piled there.

DL: Did you both pick up artifacts along the trail, that you remember?

AD: No. Well, we did find... Well, I didn't, but one of the guys did find an arrowhead or two. And there were places there where they had run the buffalo into boggy places, just to replenish their meat supply. There were a lot of arrowheads found in those areas. There were, like on the Bruce Neal place, there were six different piskuns there, buffalo jumps. There's rock piles, oh, 12, 14 feet apart that run in a V that run out, oh, probably three quarters of a mile long in different places there, funneling the buffalo into these different jumps.

DL: We're going to stop here and switch sides of the tape, so we don't run out.

[Break in audio]

DL: This is side two of tape one. Getting back to Art Pearson, when you were out in the field with him, were either one of you drawing maps at all, of the trail?

AD: Art would draw these lines of the ownership map between these points where we'd find the trail. So that trail that he marked out, certainly not much over several feet off. So it's probably done about as accurate as can be done.

DL: What do you think happened to some of those ownership maps that he had the trail on? Are they still around?

AD: They probably are. His wife probably has them.

DL: Would it be easy to find again, just by looking at that big relief map he has?

AD: The location of the trail?

DL: Yeah.

AD: Oh, I think so, yes.

DL: Maybe if you were to lay another map over it.

AD: Yeah.

DL: When was the last time you went out yourself, looking for the trail? Or after you helped Art?

AD: I was with Art. It was a real windy day, and it was toward evening—Chinook wind.

DL: You were out in the winter?

AD: Raised the water on the lake about a quarter of a mile up in the air, and it was almost unbelievable. Over half a mile away, it was wet here. Art and I had stopped our cars after we had crossed the Dearborn Bridge, and walked to where the travois trail had crossed the river below. Art had a bad heart, and I was a little worried about him going back against that wind.

DL: And you couldn't keep him in the car, could you?

AD: No, you couldn't. He just had to go out.

DL: That last time down by the Dearborn?

AD: Yeah, the north fork of the Dearborn.

DL: Did you ever go out back to Choteau again, that one time, to look for the trail again?

AD: Yes, I have, but you can't find a single trace of it. I did go out with Jim Peebles (?), and there's one place where he took us that's barely visible on the level ground. And I tried to take a picture of it, but the camera wouldn't show it.

DL: Was that a few years ago?

AD: Oh, that's about four or five...about five, six years ago.

DL: Is there a ranch right where you were as a boy, when you were in that same vicinity in the Teton Canyon?

AD: No. This area was north of there, maybe five, six, seven miles.

DL: You know that pine-y marsh area is in there, they say there's a lot of teepee rings in that part of the country.

AD: There's a lot of teepee rings all along [unintelligible] Creek and all the hills and ridges.

DL: Did you start from just south of that area? Or did you ever look for that marshy area in there?

AD: No. Art had covered that area before I started with him. I started with him, oh, just south of [unintelligible] Creek—from there on south.

DL: Was he the only person, you think, that you know of who looked for the trail at all?

AD: Oh no. I think there were probably some research done on it—on the Old North Trail. I think that's pretty good, but—

DL: What kind of research was that, do you remember?

AD: Well, this man had...he had talked to a lot of old Indians and did discover the trail somewhat, in some places. But I can't agree with him on everything that he's written there.

DL: Do you remember his name, by any chance?

AD: No, I don't.

DL: The last time you went out, you said the trail was still fading. Do you have any idea, in your mind, how the trail fits in with this area? I mean, that last time you were out in the trail, did you feel like you were in amongst other cultures or anything like that?

AD: Well, there were some Oriental coins that were found along that trail. So no doubt, maybe several hundred or thousand, two thousand years ago, someone had lost them there. The last I heard, that coin was up in [unintelligible] or Conrad area, something like that. I think perhaps, at first, this trail was used, probably full length, from Alaska down into Central America along the east side of the Rockies. But it was also used by tribes that were later living along the trail. Those who were living farther away from it, of course, didn't use it that much. But it was kind of a main highway, and it was a good way for them to travel if they were travelling from north to south or south to north. Because they had wood for their fires and water and probably a better chance to get game and concealment from enemies.

DL: So for you, what do you think of the trail then being here? Is it like having the mountains there at the same time, or is it part of how you have a sense of place for the area, spending so many years looking for it?

AD: Well, there were branches...There were trails branching off of it to various places. Now, it branched off from the main trail, went through Sun River Canyon, over Wagner Basin, and up through Sun River, north of the river. There were many places where it branched off to go various places.

DL: Do you feel a sense of history about it?

AD: Oh yes, yes, I do.

DL: For your own era as well as others?

AD: Yes. As far as the Indian population is concerned, sure. Now, the Blackfeet, or the Piegans...the Blackfeet consists of the Blackfeet and the Piegans. They eventually, or early, came from the Midwest. This trail was used by many, many tribes of Indians who went back and forth.

DL: It's interesting that most of your life you've known of the trail. Is it that way? People in the area just know about the trail without ever actually seeing it?

AD: Oh, yes, most people, I think, do. A lot of them aren't interested much in it, but there is quite a lot of interest in it. I've heard a lot of stories about it.

DL: Where do you think that interest stems from? People talk about it, but is there any place it might come up?

AD: Well, it goes back to the prehistoric times, history of the people that were here before the white man.

DL: Do ranchers seem to come across a lot of things?

AD: They have, in the past, yes.

DL: Maybe that's what they talk about more.

AD: Yeah.

DL: Because there's a network, like you said, of other trails running around on people's land. Do they ever do anything about it, like dig up or—

AD: Oh, I don't really think so. I did dig into a grave or two, but I don't do that anymore. I never did find anything, but in talking to doctors, they tell me that a body will completely disintegrate from 300 to 400 years, if it's on top of the ground. Bones will decompose. But if it's covered with ground, it could last a long time. But the way that the Indians buried their dead out here on the prairies, they usually on found a brow of a hill and put the body on the ground and covered it with rock and the Indian's personal belongings. So they weren't covered with earth. But I have known where they have taken the rocks off these graves and found the remains, the bones, probably from somebody that had been there for maybe 150 or 200 years.

DL: Are there any stories that you were told of about the old trail? Tales, or anything like that, throughout your life that you remember?

AD: Well, there were a lot of stories told about it.

DL: Do you have any favorites?

AD: It's all conjecture. There's no written history. It goes back to the Indian, and the Indian didn't have a written language and the history was handed down from father to son. Then the historians that did get this from the early Indians have used their best judgement in coming to conclusions on it.

DL: But most of the stuff that folks in the area you've talked to are mostly tales?

AD: Yeah.

DL: Hard to tell anything for truth?

AD: Yeah. It's their best judgement.

DL: When you and Art were working on it, did you feel like it was ever futile to try to actually prove it was the trail, or just your own best judgement?

AD: Oh no, we knew it was the trail. We knew it was the trail. Because we definitely followed it from points where we knew where it definitely was.

DL: Was it hard, without previous proof of the trail's existence like that, to know for certain?

AD: Oh, sometimes it took a little walking. You find one place, and you stand there and you look the direction you're going, where would you go? And the ground is rolling, you know, in most places. Where it's steep enough, why, the runoff would have washed that deeper.

DL: Yeah, I just would guess that, like today, without even real evidence of it, it just seems so hard to even prove that something like that still exists, without any written history of it, the past. With no great battles, no Lewis and Clark on it.

AD: No, no, I don't think so. Because these trails...this travois trail, going down a steep slope, would wash into a V, and there will probably be rock piles not too far away on the higher places. If you follow the path of least resistance, which they had to do with their dog travois, and you may have to do a little looking, but you'll find it and it'll be pretty certain. I'm sure that what Art and I did is just about right on.

DL: Great. Well, in conclusion, since all those years of looking for it, has your opinion changed since maybe the first time you saw the trail, of what you thought it might be today?

AD: Well, I hadn't thought too much about it when I first seen it. As I heard people talk about it, and as I read, why, I could just imagine those people traveling along that trail in maybe small parties with their dog travois and camping along there at night, getting their fire wood, [unintelligible] water.

DL: Did it help to imagine about other people on the trail?

AD: Oh, I think so. I think they were probably pretty much like you and I. They got [unintelligible] and hungry, like we do. They got tired. And they would travel from places, they would probably try to get...Where the trail didn't run too close to the trees, where concealment wasn't easy, they would probably try to cover that in a hurry, not loiter long. And they would probably camp by places where there was good concealment and water.

DL: So after all those years in the imagining of the people on the trail, it's pretty much the same?

AD: I think so. I don't think human nature has changed that much.

DL: Well, thanks a lot, Adolph. We'll just call that a day for this one.

[End of Interview]