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Oral History Number: 041-001
Interviewee: Ole Bodin
Interviewer: Diann E. Wiesner
Date of Interview: July 11, 1978
Project: Ole Bodin Interviews Oral History Project

Interview conducted in Florence, Montana.

Ole Bodin: My name is Ole Bodin. I left Sweden in 1927. Come to Washington. Then I started logging a couple of years. Then the Depression came in.

Diann Wiesner: What town in Washington?

OB: Monroe, Washington.

DW: Who did you work for?

OB: Weyerhauser and other companies.

[Break in tape]

OB: Like I said, the Depression come in and I ended up on freight trains looking for work. Bumming around here and there all over the country looking for work. I got work here and there for like a dollar a day and board. Then in between times, bum around on freight trains, but we had a lot of fun. We took in harvest in North Dakota, 25 cents an hour, board and room. We were glad we got it. Then in the end of that we took a freight train out of town and look for work at other places.

DW: How long would you work at the harvesting job?

OB: The season.

DW: Was that about a month?

OB: Oh a month or five weeks. (pauses) You got it on? [refers to tape recorder]

And then we had odd jobs here and there but they didn't last. Then we took another freight train. At that time there were only two freight trains a week, one going east and one going west. We stayed in the jungle, bought a soup bone now and then, some potatoes boiled up, cleaned up.

DW: What did you call it, the jungle? What's that?

OB: In the brush along the railroad.

DW: I see, not much shelter. Want to see if it is working?

OB: Do you have it on?

DW: Yes. What did you live in?

OB: Nothing, no covers to live in. No tent or cabin nor nothing, just the brush, that's all. Then we decided to move on. Then I come to Seattle and the streets were full of hobos. On the freight train I counted 75 persons on the top of the box cars. I don't know how many was inside. They all jumped off, tried to bum in the back doors. I was one of them. Didn't get much.

DW: Bumming the back doors—do you mean going up to houses?

OB: Ya. Then finally we end up in Seattle. I tried the soup lines and that was just like an army. You finally come to the door, my turn come to go in and you had a bowl of soup and a couple of slices of stale bread, some coffee, black coffee, no sugar and water to drink. That's all for that day. But then we have to look for a place to sleep and finally they had a place on the second floor of some warehouse. It was empty. We were all crowded in there. The floor was full. Then bed bugs bothered us, crawling all over, dropping down from the ceiling. Didn't sleep much. Then in the meantime we got lousy, full of grayback, they call them.

Well now we try to find out how to get rid of them. Took a freight train then and ended up some place, and went east again and then we tried the Salvation Army. So then we stopped there overnight and they had a deal where they turned the steam on, took all our clothes off and steamed them and killed all the lice. Get a shower and a clean bed to sleep in.

DW: What town was this in?

OB: Oh I can't think of the name now. Salvation Army, you know, you can pick them up in any town. Then we were cleaned up for a while. Then I forget where we stopped next. We stopped at a lot of places, when the freight train stopped for water for the steam engine and so on. Sometime we hit the bakery up—you know, Eddy's Bakery—for a loaf of bread and some doughnuts and then we had to look for water to drink. That's the way it was for quite a while and then we got lousy again. You could get lousy standing up in a crowd. Then we come back to Seattle again, finally. Then there was other missions and so on. You sit there for an hour or two hours listening to them and then you got some coffee and cake and probably a bowl of soup and so on and then we got filled up. Then we went to others, you know they have the different religions. We got coffee and cake and so on. We fill up. After all, we didn't know any different. There was no work to be getting. You couldn't work for you board and room.

DW: And had only been in the United States three years when this happened.

OB: Over three years. Then finally I had some friends in Washington. They started to look for gold in a little town in Montana, they called Rivulet, up Quartz Creek, they called it. So I went up there with them and looked for gold. I put in about three and a half years up there.

DW: During the Depression.

OB: Ya. We found gold enough to live on. We had lots of deer meat. Then we had some gold we could buy corn from the ranchers down below, five cents a pound, eggs five cents a dozen. We had a lot of deer meat, elk meat and so on. Bear meat...we made a good living then. But there was no outside work to be gettin'.

DW: Did you ever meet Olie who lived up Fish Creek?

OB: Olie?

DW: Yes. Hamilton. [Olie Hamilton lived in Fish Creek for over 50 years, working with her husband in outfitting and trapping. The dates were approximately 1920-1975.]

OB: No.

DW: You know Fish Creek is near...

OB: Oh I was up Fish Creek. I was up at the lookout station in Fish Creek. Steep, hills to climb, ya. We went up there too—Fish Creek—for fishing. We got a pack sack full of trout.

DW: You did what?

OB: Pack sack, half full of trout. Good fishing.

DW: That's not bad eating either.

OB: Then finally, oh about '36, '37 the times got to be a little better. So I stopped in a town called Philipsburg, Mt., went to work in a little sawmill. Two and a half a day and then they took a dollar off for board. I stayed there quite a time, oh about seven or eight months. Then there was other sawmills, I worked in them and that was the same kind of pay and all that. I didn't make no money to speak of. Then I ended up in Drummond, worked in rock quarries, put in about ten hours in that to make five dollars a day and then they took off a dollar a day for board. The highest pay was about four dollars a day then. Then we had a radio, that was in '37, '33. Then in '39 the war broke out. We listened to that when Hitler declared war on Poland. Oh, oh, now we have to go. I said I'm willing to go any day. But I didn't get drafted right then. The United States stopped that Hitler war anyway. So I ended up in the next one. I got drafted in '42. I was 41 years old. The Japan War—well, I got issued a lot of stuff to go across to the South

Sea Islands, and Roosevelt [President Franklin Delano Roosevelt] changed the age limit down to 38 years old. I was 42 years old so then I had to apply for a discharge. I wasn't going to do it, but then the captains and lieutenants and all that talked me into it. "Why don't you apply for a discharge? You've got the right to." So I did.

They wouldn't take me any way, you know them. [refers to being shipped to the South Sea Islands] So then I got out of that.

Well I figured I wasn't any better than anybody else. It didn't bother me any. I was willing to go. So then there's been war after that but I was too old then to go anymore. Then I ended up on ranch work. Finally, I ended up here now in Florence, Montana, and I have been here 11 years. I like the place. Nice people to work for.

DW: What states did you do your ranch work in after you were discharged? Was it here in Montana?

OB: Well I had to go to work in defense for a while in the Butte mines. But then, so many got killed in there, it scared me out of there.

DW: Working in Butte?

OB: Ya. Well then, in the meantime, I went out logging in Washington, but then I got to be over 45 and so they wouldn't hire me anymore. Oh and then I got sick in between time, now and then and I couldn't work steady. I decided to quit it. That's hard work too. In Washington, big trees, you know.

DW: Were you a sawyer?

OB: (nods) The biggest fir I cut was 10,000 feet in one tree.

DW: 10,000 board feet?

OB: Ya. The biggest cedar I cut...Well, then most of them were short butted anyway. I don't know how many. A 1,000 feet was in that [butt]. It was 18 feet across the stump. They made mostly shingles out of that. That's the way it went. So then after that I ended up on ranch work. Finally I ended up here in Florence, Montana. I have been here 11 years with Maclays, Holmes and Bruce Maclay. I'm still here and I'm going to stay here. I'm 77 years old. I've never been on welfare or anything like that. I've never believed in that as long as I can work. Been getting my Social Security. I enjoy myself when I do a little work instead of living in town, sitting around. So I might retire any day now, getting too old for that too, to work anymore.

DW: Yes, you have put in long days. Maybe you could just put in shorter days. What other kind of ranch work have you done?

OB: They are all the same. Haying, irrigating. I never done any cowboying.

DW: Not much horseback riding?

OB: No I never hired out for that. That takes younger guys to do that.

DW: Yes, by the time you were in ranch work, you were in your 50s almost. When you came over to the United States you came to the state of Washington and you came to live with a cousin didn't you? Was it a cousin?

OB: Well, I called him a brother-in-law in Washington. His sister was married to my oldest brother, and then I had a sister who was married to his brother.

DW: So you were related through marriage?

OB: Ya.

DW: Did you have it arranged before you came over to come and live with him?

OB: Ya, he send me ticket.

DW: I see.

OB: There was a depression in Sweden too, I didn't make nothing there either.

DW: So you were looking for work?

OB: So I come over here and I thought I was going digging for gold...I mean by the bushel.
(laughs)

DW: Right!

OB: Instead of that it got worse here.

DW: Yes the depression just followed you over the ocean.

OB: Strange too, you know. I didn't have no mother or nobody to go to here.

DW: Right, and did you speak English?

OB: No, not then when I first come over. I learned that in a year's time.

DW: Did you just live with this brother-in-law or—?

OB: I lived with him for a year until I started to talk English, then I took off with an American.

DW: What do you mean? Do you mean with your English? You said then you took off with an American.

OB: I traveled with Americans and worked with Americans.

DW: Oh, okay. Did you have a job when you first came over or did you have to find one?

OB: No, he had a job then but it didn't last long...to clear land. We made 20 dollars a day, so we made around 400 dollars apiece, the three of us. Well, then we had to go to a lawyer to get the money. So then he took 20 percent of that and it took a couple of months before we got it. In between time we had to eat and pay rent. We didn't have much left.

DW: Yes and by the time you got it—

OB: Is it off? [refers to tape recorder.]

So that's the way it went. So that's how I learned to talk. You had to learn but it takes time to learn.

DW: How old were you when you came over?

OB: Twenty-six years old.

DW: Twenty-six. So you had finished school?

OB: I finished school and I was drafted into the army in Sweden. That's compulsory in Sweden. They all had to go when you are 21 years old. So I put in, I don't know, nine or ten months other than that, infantry. Then they took me off, put me through school—officers' school for two months—to learn how to take over in case the leaders were killed and all that. So I know all about that. I can still do that. That was some experience. It was very hard training too, but then I was 21 years old and it didn't bother me any. I never got tired in those days. I never laid off a day for sore feet or sick or anything. Every day I put in.

DW: How did they teach you to take over in case the leaders were killed?

OB: They do that out in the drill field.

DW: I see, to take command of the troops.

OB: They were very strict about it.

DW: How long were you in this officers' training school?

OB: Twenty-two months extra. Everybody got discharged then, but they picked me out of my company, and there were several others from other companies. There were 135 men to a company—three battalions—four companies to one battalion.

DW: I see, I don't know the set up.

OB: See the figures.

DW: Okay, yes.

OB: So you got to know something to take over, you know, a little bit to lead the people out of danger. That's the main thing.

DW: How much longer were you in the service after that training?

OB: Well, I had to go in one month, 30 days after that next year they called it. It was a repeat, and then they went out on maneuvers and all that, just like a war—30 days. They had a cook wagon drawn by horse. Pea soup, awful

DW: Did you get a lot of that?

OB: Oh ya. Then sometimes they pretend that the cook wagon got lost, and you have to go without food. This was supposed to be war, you know. So then we didn't get no- thing to eat. Well, then, we finally got it the next day. That's the way they play war. We had to pitch a tent overnight on a swampy place one time—damp, wet ground—sleep at night. Next morning we have to get up and take the tent down. Keep on walking—hiking. Oh we can hike about 25 or 30, in English miles. Not on a highway, through the mountains.

DW: And with heavy equipment?

OB: Oh, we carried a full pack—ammunition, rifle.

DW: What kind of rifle?

OB: Well, I had an automatic rifle. I was one of the best shots in the company.

DW: Oh, you were?

OB: So they gave me an automatic rifle. You pull the trigger, and you shoot three bullets. You

can't help it—three bullets. So when I aimed at something, them bullets hit in a triangle like. (indicates a three-inch triangle with thumbs and index fingers). That's how good I was.

DW: What caliber rifle?

OB: A .30.

DW: What part of Sweden are you from?

OB: Helsingland.

DW: Where is that?

OB: It's not so far from Stockholm.

DW: Oh, okay.

OB: It is in the middle there someplace. So I tried a little of everything. In Ostersund when I was there. I don't know the words of it now. I forgot. I think I can play it on a mouth harp.

DW: What is that? Play on what?

OB: There were two brothers. They drowned up there in the lake, up there in Urmeo, when they were in the army. In that community they were all sad about it, two farm boys, you know. Drinking on the lake, and one took that bottle. They tipped over like this, and they went down. Then the other one, there were three of them in the boat, he was able to swim so he made it to shore. When he looked back and there were two hats laying on the water. So they were talking about that in the army, like Saturday night and Sunday. We went out to a dance, and everyone was talking about this and everyone was so sad all over. I can play a little bit [song about the two brothers] on the mouth harp...a tune. (plays song on mouth harp)

DW: Well done!

OB: Do you want that on there? [refers to his music]

DW: I put it on. You didn't see me slip that one on, did you? What is the name of that in English?

OB: Oh, I can't think of the name now.

DW: When did you pick this up? When you were in the army?

OB: Ya. Then there was the immigrant song. (plays song on mouth harp)

DW: Well done! Do you do that very often? You must play that pretty often. That's the immigrant song?

OB: Ya, that's the oldest one. That is about 200 years old.

DW: Oh my word!

OB: I can play my own.

DW: Do it.

OB: (plays song on mouth harp)

DW: You made that one up yourself?

OB: Ya.

DW: That's the new immigrant song?

OB: Well, it's 25 years old.

DW: I see, why is it called the immigrant song?

OB: I left Sweden in 1927.

DW: Is that when you made it up?

OB: Ya.

DW: I see. You said there was an immigrant song that was 200 years old, the first one you played?

OB: Ya. Oh, I heard that for years in Sweden.

DW: Is that something you learned as a boy or heard as a boy?

OB: Ya.

DW: You said you learned your logging over there, you learned how to saw...

OB: In Sweden?

DW: Yes.

OB: Well, I was born and raised in the timbered country. Where I was born and raised, there were small farms. They only had about eight or ten cows and a couple of horses. In the wintertime, we done logging for some big company to make money to pay taxes—

DW: Yes, that sounds familiar.

OB: —and clothes for ourselves. In the summertime we stayed home.

You got it on? [refers to tape recorder]

In the summertime we had to put in the crops, barley, oats and corn in the spring—a team of horses. There were times that I harrowed walking alongside the harrow and team of horses all day. At night, in the evening, I rested a couple of hours, and then I kept going all night—walking. My dad was always in a hurry to get the crop in before it started raining. Then we get delayed a couple of weeks, and it would make a lot of difference in the fall of the year. Then during the summer there was hay to put up. There was no tractors or anything then. That's the way she was. Cut wood and poles and all that, fencing and so on. That's what we did every year.

DW: Did you drag them out of the woods with a team of horses?

OB: Ya. Usually one horse.

DW: Oh, just one horse. How far away to the sawmill?

OB: No, we drug them home in our yard whole for wood. Then we had to saw that up in blocks and split it for wood—firewood.

DW: Oh, did you cut some to sell also?

OB: No.

DW: Just whatever you needed on the farm?

OB: Ya.

DW: I see. I didn't understand that at first. So you cut it for firewood?

OB: We had to have a lot of wood, you know, it was a cold country and in the winter it takes a lot of wood to heat. People don't realize, now they got oil and electricity. We didn't have no hot water heaters and things like that.

DW: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

OB: There were seven altogether, four brothers and three sisters. Four years ago when I made a trip to Sweden there was only one sister and one brother left.

DW: Who was the oldest?

OB: Lester, he's four years...a little over three years older than me. He died a couple of years after I left. My mother died, my father and then my oldest sister died, and here I was. I couldn't go to the funeral. One died after another. She was dead, he was dead. My dad died.

DW: Was it from disease?

OB: Oh, got sick you know. My dad had stomach trouble anyway, then he died from it. Then I had a sister who got married and went to Norway. She was next to the oldest sister. She had four or five kids. She got run over by a car and killed while going to get groceries. So that was the end of her. I couldn't go to any of their funerals.

DW: That's the hard thing about immigrating, You can't keep up with the family. Proposition 13 [proposed referendum to reduce California property taxes] wouldn't help you any.

OB: No. No, I love this country the best. I could have stayed in Sweden. Ya.

DW: You could have gone back after the Depression, I suppose?

OB: I could have, but I didn't want to go back then, empty handed. I knew how it was over there, and then I liked it better here than there and I stayed. There was nothing to go back for.

DW: Just to keep up with the family, which would be the main compelling reason.

OB: Well, one reason, after my folks died...if they had lived probably I would have gone back. You know how it is when your mother is dead and your dad. Your father is dead. You don't have anybody to go to then. The brothers and sisters are married so that's a little different. Then now in later years I got glaucoma. They never found a cure for. They can't cure glaucoma. So I had an operation. I had an operation after I went to Sweden, and then it's free hospital over there. So that was blurry and then I got it in both eyes. Here I had an operation in one eye. Then I had trouble passing water. That started. I have been in the hospital I don't know how many times, four times. When that stops then I got to go in. Then they put a tube in me, and then they operate on me.

DW: Does that seem to help?

OB: Well, it helps for a little, and then it starts growing back together again.

DW: Boy, that is a problem.

OB: I got out of the hospital here, now, a week ago. I was in five days. It has been six days since I have been back.

DW: You were in the hospital while I was away?

OB: Yes, five days.

DW: Well, for goodness sake.

OB: Put me to sleep and they operated. They telescope it now. You can't operate here anymore. That's the first operation but they can't do it twice. They telescope it. You go in the clinic first. They don't put you to sleep in there. That hurts worse than anything. Then you go to the hospital. The next morning they come and put you to sleep and work on you and keep you there five or six days.

DW: How have you felt since you got back?

OB: I'm not sick. I've never been sick, never had no fever or nothing.

DW: How are you "working" now?

OB: Oh, it "works" pretty good now, for a while.

DW: What did the doctor say? Did he say he thought you would be all right now?

OB: Not forever. I might have to go back in a couple of months.

DW: I'm sorry to hear that.

OB: You know, to see how it is.

DW: Yes, as long as it is just a checkup, that will be all right.

OB: If you got a family and go to a store and got four or five kids, I don't see how you can make it. Pay rent in town, 300 or 400 or 500 dollars a month and so on. That's the way it is, apartment or house, it's hard to get.

DW: Yes, making house payments...

OB: Or rent. You can't afford to buy a house. Most people can't. It's now 5,000 or 6,000 dollars for a house anymore. Twenty-five to forty thousand now—sixty thousand. Then you buy it on payment and you got to have a good income. If you got a family you go to the store and buy a T-bone steak, you got to have that once in a while. (laughs)

DW: Yes, just to feel successful.

[End of Interview]