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Oral History Number: 119-002, 003

Interviewee: George Neff

Interviewer: Orlan J. Svingen

Date of Interview: May 8, 1984

Project: Champion International Corporation Centennial Oral History Project

Orlan J. Svingen: My name is Orlan Svingen and I'm the program manager for Historical Research Associates and I'm interviewing Mr. George Neff. We're doing this in conjunction with Champion International's contract, wherein they have asked Historical Research Associates to conduct research and gather historical documents for their centennial celebration. Today is May 8, is that right? It's May 8, 1984, and we're in the home of Mr. Neff. He's in East Missoula. At this point I'd like Mr. Neff to introduce himself, this fellow's name for instance, and just go over his background from the start, to just get a real brief biographical sketch of himself from the beginning, until the beginning of this his association with Anaconda and his retirement with Champion.

George Neff: Well, I'm George Neff and the last name is spelled N-E-double F. I'm a retired, while actually, solo manager for Montana or Champion International. I started working in Bonner for Anaconda, what was in the lumber department of Anaconda Copper Mining Company, in February of 1942. I was hired as a timber cruiser, which involved examination of timber and logging engineering work. In 1945 I was promoted to assistant management for the forest products division, and in 1949, on the death of Roscoe Haines, I was made land agent in his place. In April of 1964, I was given the additional responsibilities as the production manager at the Bonner operations. I continued in that job until Anaconda sold its forest products division to Champion International, and I was employed by Champion International in September 1972, as production manager of the sawmill at Bonner. I was later made Montana lumber operations manager with responsibility for both the sawmill at Bonner and the sawmill at Silver City, Montana. I retired from that position in August of 1977. I've been retired since that time.

OS: Okay. Okay, you retired in August of 1977. Right? That's what you said. Let me ask a number of questions. First of all, can you describe, in 1942, if there's any connection between production at the mill and World War II's effort? Do you know? Did production increase? Stay the same? Also, was there a special spirit of employment out there? Were there strong pro-war effort, or can you just say a few things about the early '40s and World War II?

GN: Well, of course, I went to work there after the war had started, and I don't have any personal knowledge of the people's feeling or their production prior to the actual start of the war. I always had a feeling that there was a strong pro-United States feeling there, for lumber production or the war effort. At that time, during the war, we were on a six-day-week operation, that continued right through until the end of the war.

OS: Now that was from Monday through Saturday then?

GN: Monday through Saturday.

OS: Now is that is that fairly unusual, as you look back on things now?

GN: Ordinarily they were working on a five-day basis, yes. After the war, they head back to five-day basis.

OS: Well, that's the first I've heard of that— the sixth day operation, and that strongly suggests that there was an increased production effort at the mill during that time.

GN: No question about it. They set production records as far as volume was concerned, but of course, a lot of it was due to the fact they were working an extra day each week.

OS: Did your family or your parents [come] from around here now, or did you just move here yourself in '42?

GN: No, I lived here since I was in the third grade in the Missoula area. My father was a logging engineer for the Forest Service in what is now Region 1.

OS: Yes, I see. Okay. He never had anything to do with the mill?

GN: No, except the relationship between the lumber company and the Forest Service. You had close relationships with Don MacKenzie [Donald Grant "Don" MacKenzie] and Roscoe Haines and some of the other people who worked for Anaconda.

OS: What was it like when you first began working in 1942, for ACM? What was it like working out here? Good? Were you glad to get the job? Did you intend to stay as long as you have? What made you go there in the first place?

GN: Well I am a forestry graduate, and I had always felt that I wanted to go into private industry forestry, and when an opportunity presented itself, Roscoe Haines was looking for a young forester as a potential replacement, I believe. Matter of fact, it was for that purpose. I was interested, and I went to work for him, came from the Forest Service.

OS: How did you meet him? He just heard that he was looking for someone?

GN: Well, he inquired of the Forest Service office in Missoula, and eventually my father found out about it and he advised me.

OS: Kind of just passed information along?

GN: Just passed the information along.

OS: I see. You said you were a forestry graduate? Here at the University of Montana?

GN: University of Montana. At that time, it was Montana State University however. [laughs]

OS: Isn't that something? I've seen books that have MSU. It took me a long time to figure that out. They changed the name around. Were there many like you, did the mill employ a lot of individuals with forestry backgrounds, like yourself?

GN: No, I was the—as far as I know—the first one with a with a forestry education background. The Land Department, as they called it at that time, didn't have very many employees and they also, at that time, they were managing their forests in a different way. It was more or less the sawyer's choice on what they cut in the woods.

OS: When you say sawyer's choice, you could take whatever you wanted, more or less.

GN: More or less, although they had diameter amendments and some guidelines.

OS: Sustained yield wasn't something that you looked at?

GN: No. They, I think, assumed a lot of times that they had sustained yield without planning it, but they really didn't at that point.

OS: Did your background bring new ideas? Was there was a resistance to some of the educated forestry background?

GN: I never felt any personal animosity because of my forestry background. As a matter fact, I think that's what really got me ahead, in some ways. It was a struggle to actually introduce a forestry program, on a sustained yield basis, and that, of course, had to have the approval of the corporate headquarters. Particularly the vice president in Butte. I made the pitch to him, and then, of course, he put it over to the New York office. We did get the authority to initiate what we considered, what I still consider, a very good forestry program.

OS: Now you mentioned that you began, in '42, as timber cruiser. The word "cruiser," is new to me now, and maybe everyone else in the world knows about it, but why don't you explain "cruiser" again?

GN: Basically a cruiser is a person who examines timberland to determine the value and volume of timber there, by making a scientific cruise, an examination.

OS: There are several places, I suppose now, but why don't you give me the highlights of some of the camps, the various logging camps that gave a large amount of production in the '40s?

GN: Well, when I went to work there, productions were at the headquarters, Camp 1, I guess

they called it, but it was always known as headquarters. Camp 11, which is on, I can't think of what they call it now, Rainbow Lake, I believe they called it then. When I started, while I was called a timber cruiser, well I was mainly in logging engineering, laying out logging railroad, or logging truck-road. Surveying for truck-roads. Those were the two production camps.

OS: Now those were up on the Blackfoot?

GN: They were in the Blackfoot.

OS: Headquarters?

GN: Headquarters camp was at Woodworth.

OS: Okay. When you said headquarters, that doesn't ring a bell at all, but Woodworth, I know that.

GN: That's what they used to call it, yes. Or Woodworth, or Camp 1.

OS: And then there was Camp 11.

GN: Camp 11 was also, at that time—

OS: That's what you're saying [was] at Rainbow Lake.

GN: Yes.

OS: There's a different name?

GN: Yes, I can't think of any of them now.

OS: What about Lubrecht? Is there a Lubrecht Forest? Or a Lubrecht—

GN: W.C. Lubrecht was general manager of the lumber department of Anaconda Copper Mining Company at Bonner when I went to work there and for several years afterward. During the '30s, the Anaconda Company and the Northern Pacific Railroad granted about 30,000 acres, most of it Anaconda land, to the forestry school. [The Anaconda Company donation, in 1937, was 19,058 acres. In 1939 the Northern Pacific donated another 1,210 acres. Over the years private donations have brought it to the present total of 28,000 acres.] They called Forest Green (?) Experiment Station, I believe, and that has been dedicated as Lubrecht Forest, in honor of W.C. Lubrecht.

OS: Okay. So I was looking for the name of Rainbow, but it may—Rainbow and Lubrecht are different kinds of spots and areas. 30,000 acres though, it what you—

GN: Oh, not quite that much. It's about 4,000, I guess, I've forgotten that. No, by golly. It might be as much as 30,000; there's quite a little acreage there.

OS: Yes, I've gone by, too. I've taken Highway 200. I've never really stopped to see.

GN: That was before my time, and I saw a lot of the instruments and things like that, but I wasn't pretty concerned, or involved.

OS: Speaking of the '30s, your father was in there area then, and you've grown up here since the third grade. Do you have any the remembrances regarding the 1930s, and the impact of the Depression on the area? The mill, perhaps, or just the area in general?

GN: Only what my own experience was. I was teenager at that time, and had a devil of a time getting a job in the summertime when I wasn't going to school.

OS: Yes. One of the fellows, I think, perhaps, Mr. [Onnie] Hamma, was talking about the wages out there being like 37 cents an hour?

GN: I think it was 37 and a half. [laughs]

OS: 37 and a half. I think that's right. [laughs] Well, 37 and a half makes a great deal of difference.

GN: [laughs] Yes.

OS: You remember that as being the same wage?

GN: Yes. It went up to 50 eventually. Well, of course, it was frozen during the war.

OS: Oh, I didn't know that. It was frozen during the war?

GN: Well, practically all industrial wages were really froze, and then of course after the war, when the unions got strong, and the [American Federation of Labor] union got strong, they called a six-month strike in '46 and '47.

OS: Do you remember the months or even an approximation?

GN: Well, I think it was October, November, December, and then January, February, March. Approximately. That's about right.

OS: 1946-47? Okay, because I hear it referred to as a six-month strike, and I heard them say '46 but no one could really— your dates are closer than anybody's been willing to—

GN: I believe that those were approximately the dates, sure.

OS: You mentioned a few things about the union; no one has really talked much about the union. Do you know which it was? Was it CIO, AFL?

GN: Well, it became the lumber production industrial workers', it was a branch of the Carpenters Union. [It was originally the IWW, Industrial Workers of the World and later the mill workers were represented by the AFL and the lumber camp workers by the CIO. After the 1946 strike the AFL became the official union.] Lumber and sawmill workers, which was a branch of the Carpenter's Union, and then, when they—I don't know just exactly how it was—but when AFL-CIO converted to Lumber Production and Industrial Workers, I believe is what they call it right now. [This union, part of the IWW, ended in 1924.]

OS: I see. Did you ever join the union?

GN: No.

OS: Do you recall when it started? When people did begin joining the union?

GN: I can't—

OS: Would it have been after World War II, or during?

GN: Before.

OS: Oh, it was before the war? Oh, I see, it was before. Late '30s?

GN: Before my time.

OS: It was before your time? Okay, now I see, no one has told me that either.

GN: There was a union.

OS: When you came here there was a union?

GN: Yes.

OS: In '42.

GN: That's right. But, no salaried employees were members of the union and I was a salaried employee. Albeit, paid less than most of the loggers at that time. Didn't get a big high salary when I went there. [laughs]

OS: We had a discussion earlier about transportation. Can you talk about how logs, early on, got to the mill? I think in the '20s was the last river float, I suppose. [1928] So we're talking mainly about trucks and railroads.

GN: I believe that transportation was covered in that original 50 years of Bonner write-up, the old river drives. I had no personal knowledge of the river drive. But when I went to work, the trucks were just coming in. However, most of the logs out of the Blackfoot, to the company operations, were railroad logs. They used the old Shay geared locomotives.

OS: Say that again, now? The old—

GN: Shay geared locomotives.

OS: A little small, sort of—

GN: A geared one, instead of just a rod, like the mainline locomotive.

OS: I see.

GN: They can climber steeper.

OS: Lower gear ratio. So they can go slower, pull more.

GN: Right. Gear down. That's correct.

OS: And you call them Shay?

GN: If you get ahold of Don MacKenzie, he can give you everything on them. He was the railroad man. He was a [unintelligible] lieutenant during the railroad era. But, the first trucks were purchased, well, actually, they weren't purchased, they were a contract operation. Gyppo trucks.

OS: What?

GN: Gyppo. The logging term "gyppo," is a contractor.

OS: Oh, I see, okay.

GN: Whether he be an individual contractor, as a sawyer, or one running the whole logging operation, selling logs to the company.

OS: How do you spell gyppo?

GN: G-Y-P-P-O is the way I spell it. Now some people spell it with one P.

OS: So they're a contractor of any sort in the logging business.

GN: Right. Art Koch, K-O-C-H, had owned these International logging trucks, they called them corn-binders, because it's International connection.

OS: Corn-binders? [laughs]

GN: While most of the logs are still being skidded with tractors to the railroad landings, he was starting his truck operations to areas that you couldn't get the railroad grade in. It's too steep to put the tracks in for the operation along the river.

OS: Oh, I see.

GN: He contracted the trucking for quite a number of years, until he became ill, and the company bought his trucks, the whole fleet. They're still in the logging truck business.

OS: So Art Koch began before you got there, in '42.

GN: About that time, he was working when I went to work in '42.

OS: Okay. When do you suppose, do you have any notion, as to when he would've sold off?

GN: I don't remember what year it was. Probably—

OS: The '60s?

GN: In the '50s, I would guess.

OS: So actually, the trucks hauling logs to Bonner Mill began in the early '40s—what's a good guess?

GN: Well, first, the trucks hauled the logs from the woods to the railhead, and they were still brought into Bonner by rail for quite a number of years after that.

OS: I see, so the trucks would be used just—

GN: To get to areas that were not really logical for—

OS: Inaccessible.

GN: Yes, not logical for railroad logs.

OS: I see, okay, now I didn't understand that part, that's good to know. Can you talk about the development of trucks? Do they use the railroad much now? It seems to me the railroad is used less and less and less over the years.

GN: They don't use it at all now.

OS: Not at all, okay.

GN: Since last year, Champion—and this is past my time but I know about it—they discontinued even the railroad transportation from the Thompson River Landing to Bonner, which is 150 miles, or something like that.

OS: So it's all truck now.

GN: It's all truck.

OS: It's all truck, okay.

GN: Well, the trucks got more efficient and the railroads got more independent.

OS: Which means more expensive.

GN: Yes.

OS: Yes, okay, okay. We've talked, in a sense, about the logs coming to the plant. What about the finished products? What do you remember about that? As far as once lumber was into a finished state? Was much of the timber shipped by rail?

GN: All of it was shipped by rail when I first went to work at Bonner.

OS: Oh, all of it was?

GN: Almost all of it, as the trucking industry got more efficient, and more aggressive, they switched to trucks for those areas that were logical for trucks and that became wider spread all the time. When I retired, we probably shipped half by truck, or maybe even more than that. About half, maybe, at that time.

OS: We were talking a bit about the strike, in '46, do you recall the issues that were involved?

GN: Wages, principally.

OS: Principally wages. Okay. Does it have anything to do with the end of the war? Were people coming back? Were there a large number of laborers available after the war? [unintelligible, interviewer and interviewee talk over each other]

GN: Yes, I suppose that's true, but the operation was unionized and we didn't just hire people to replace people there, it was a wage situation. They'd been going on for quite some time on the same wages, and, of course, things had started to increase and the wage demand helped make them increase more. [laughs] But the company was pretty stubborn, and so was the union, and it lasted for six months.

OS: Well, it makes sense now, you mentioned earlier that there had been a freeze on wages, so I'm sure that the union figured that once the war was over with, there was no need to have a freeze in wages, and they were looking for an increase.

GN: That's right.

OS: Okay. Now that's another part that hadn't been filled in.

GN: I was not involved in any of the union negotiations, I was later, but not—

OS: In 1945, you mentioned you became assistant land agent? And in 1949, you became land agent at the death of Roscoe Haines. What did the land agent do?

GN: Well, as I say, at that time we didn't have a real forestry program, and the land agent was in charge of the negotiations with county assessors for timberland taxes, sale of purchase of timberland, or any land that was involved. [They] examined it while the cruisers and logging engineers examined the timber for purchase, or whatever use. He was in charge of some 700,000 acres that Anaconda owned.

OS: 700,000? Hadn't been aware of that term. How did your job change when you succeeded Roscoe Haines?

GN: Well, I was then in charge of the land department— [doorbell rings] Excuse me.

OS: Okay, I was asking about how your job changed when you became land agent in 1949.

GN: Well, then I was put in charge of the timberland.

OS: And that would've been 700,000 acres.

GN: Right.

OS: Okay. Did you have people reporting to you? Did you go off and determine what trees would be felled and so on, or did you more or less coordinate efforts with other people who did this sort of thing?

GN: The logging department, at that time, was not under the land agent. It was separate from it. It was actually just the management of the lands and timber themselves, rather than the log production or the logging. Then, in, I don't recall the year, they finally put the logging—well, I guess, before Don MacKenzie retired—they gave their logging responsibility to the, I guess at that time, I'd been made land manager. I was in charge of logging and the timberlands. Also at that time, more than half of the log production was by gyppo operator.

OS: Okay. You say more than half of log production, that is, logs that were brought in were contracted.

GN: They log on company land, under the direction of the land department, and the employees of the land department. We then started to hire foresters. They would log the timber that was designated, or so much a thousand board feet, delivered on cars for shipment to Bonner.

OS: I see. By then about 50 percent?

GN: Yes, more than 50 percent, at that time, was by contract operation.

OS: When we get to the early '50s, minds can turn a bit to the Korean War, and I haven't asked anybody about this, I probably should have. Did the Korean War affect operations at all? People being gone or increased production or anything like that?

GN: Well, there wasn't the push for increased production for the Korean War that there was for World War II. There were quite a few people who were drafted during that Korean War period that left the operation, but they were replaced and then when they came back, they came back into the operation.

OS: I see. Regarding the 1950s, you would've been, let's see, from '49 until 1964, you were a land agent. Does anything stand out in your mind in terms of production? In terms of policy with ACM? That would've been in the sense that that covers, perhaps, about 15 years of your employment at ACM as land agent. Was it just more of the same? Were there many changes? Was it just sort of work as usual between '49 and '64?

GN: I don't recall any dramatic changes during that time.

OS: When you look back over these years, how would you characterize the relationship between people who worked at the mill and Anaconda Company?

GN: Generally good. Anaconda, as the big company, Anaconda Company had, particularly in the Butte operation and Anaconda, had lots of labor problems. Anaconda, the lumber department, didn't have anywhere near this adverse feeling between management and labor. During the '70s, we went for months without even a grievance from the union and we had good relations for quite a long time.

OS: One quickly calls to mind Butte, and I suppose Butte had plenty of labor problems over there with the mining part of Anaconda.

GN: They did.

OS: Do you have any feeling as to what accounts for the positive relations in Anaconda? You were still in a portion of Anaconda, but of course, you were lumber oriented, as opposed to mining.

GN: One of the vice presidents in Butte said, one time—

[audio cuts out]

OS: Now, I'd like to just ask again what accounts for the good relations? You had given an answer, but I think we missed it over the tape. Who is this fellow now?

GN: Well, one of the vice presidents in Butte was the manager of the western operations for Anaconda at the time said the hatred for the company came in mother's milk.

OS: The hatred for the company came in mother's milk?

GN: [laughs] Yes.

OS: I don't understand that, now.

GN: They just grew up, people grew up hating the company over there.

OS: Oh, over in Butte?

GN; Yes.

OS: Oh, I see.

GN: But we didn't have that in Bonner, and I'm not sure they have to that extent in Butte.
[laughs]

OS: That's a pretty basic dislike, I'd say.

GN: Well, it was a facetious remark, of course.

OS: It got to the point that—

GN: They were adversaries.

OS: Yes. Are lumber people different than miners? Is that part of it too?

GN: I'm not too familiar with miners, really, but yes, lumber people are different from anybody.
[laughs]

OS: Miners certainly strike me as different.

GN: They're a breed. Yes.

OS: Is there something about lumber people that makes them more cooperative? I think of them as independent.

GN: I think it was a case where the people in management were probably listening a little bit better in Bonner than they did in Butte, and as a consequence, labor relations were generally better. I don't know if the people are so much different, but at least my experience, when I was involved in negotiations with the union, we got along quite well. We had strikes threatened and they never happened, but then we actually got along pretty well. I always felt I was friendly with the officers of the union. As a matter of fact, I hired the president of the union as a foreman at Bonner [laughs]. He had to leave the union when he took the job.

OS: Well that suggests fairly positive relations. When we think of the 1960s, we think of a lot of changes out of the mill itself. Now you would've been land manager until 1964, so it wasn't until that year that you became production manager at Bonner. How did your job change when you went from land manager to production manager at the sawmill?

GN: Well as land manager, I was in charge of the logging and the timberlands. Under the title production manager, I assumed the additional responsibility for all the manufacturing plants at Bonner.

OS: You assumed the responsibility for—

GN: All of the manufacturing plants at Bonner as well as the timber and logging.

OS: Okay. What did they manufacture?

GN: At that time, they had two sawmills, a small log mill, and a regular three-head rig saw mill.

OS: What's that?

GN: Well, there's three main saws, in the mill, big mill. It had a molding plant, and eventually, a house plant, where we prefabricated houses, in sections. A truss plant, and a glue-laminated beam plant.

OS: So your job changed dramatically, though, when you went from land manager to production manager?

GN: That's right.

OS: That was a real flip-flop, I mean, I suspect otherwise you were accountable for things out in the hinterlands, when you were land agent.

GN: When I was land manager, I was responsible for the forestry program, and I was responsible for getting logs into the plants at Bonner.

OS: Okay, and once you went to Bonner it was a matter of, you became responsible for making logs into finished products.

GN: Finished products. Right.

OS: Was that a difficult transition?

GN: Yes. [laughs]

OS: How so? I would be afraid to do something that different, that dramatically different.

GN: Scared the hell out of me! [laughs] Yes, it was difficult because I didn't have the background in the manufacturing process; I never worked in the sawmill. Many people, in college or something, they work in a sawmill. I never did. I worked in the timber end, even when I was going to college [unintelligible]. So it was a dramatic change and it took me a lot of Sundays to catch up on what was going on.

OS: I bet, I bet. The expansion that begins around, I think around 1961, 1962, would've been underway then before you came in as—

GN: I think the big expansion started in 1962, and of course we just looked up the dedication of the new planer and lumber storage building was in August of '73, wasn't it?

OS: I think it was '63.

GN: Of '63.

OS: That's what you meant, yes. Now, you said a planer and a lumber storage, that was— those went together in '63, that's what was dedicated then?

GN: Yes, that was my birthday. [laughs]

OS: Is that right? What was that again?

GN: I should've remembered that! [laughs]

OS: Talk about the planer and the lumber storage warehouse; was it a warehouse?

GN: Yes, I guess most people would call it a warehouse, but what they did, they automated the finishing of the rough lumber. They put in a lot of automatic transfers and things to ostensibly eliminate hand labor. It didn't eliminate as much as they hoped it would, but it did make a more efficient operation, and they, at that time, also went to packaging the lumber in standard packages, which they hadn't done before. For machine-loading and machine handling. The big storage building could hold, well, about a month's production in the operation.

OS: It could hold one month's production?

GN: Approximately that, yes. Of course the idea wasn't to have that much production ahead, but to even out good times and bad times why you built up some inventory and then cut it down.

OS: I went through the plant now, but it's kind of a blur to me here, but that is the plant that has the overhead cranes?

GN: That's correct.

OS: That go back and forth and haul things?

GN: All the lumber handled, is still now handled in packages by the overhead cranes, and set down at the loading point where it's picked up by lift trucks and loaded into cars and trucks.

OS: I'm thinking of the green wood versus the dry wood. Is the warehouse separated by kilns?

GN: Lumber goes through the sawmill first. Through an automated sorting system, through the dry kilns, and into a storage area, cooling storage area. Then it's taken out of there, into the plane building, where it's—

OS: Once it's dry, then it goes to the planer.

GN: That's right.

OS: Okay, I remember.

GN: I don't know whether they're doing it now, but some of the dimension lumber, the two by fours, principally, two by four studs, were air dried, but because of the additional amount coming out of plywood [unintelligible], some of that was air dried, but most of it went through the dry kiln.

OS: So then it would go to the planer, and describe that process and what happens after that.

GN: Well, the planer of course planes off—how do you explain it—it's a series of rotating knives that smooths all four sides. It's then sorted into grades, and then put into packages, by grade, for storage, or shipment.

OS: How does it get into the large crane in the warehouse then? It goes from the planer to the warehouse then?

GN: They're connected, in the same building, as a matter of fact, it just moved over on roll cases to where the cranes can pick them up.

OS: Do you remember whether they had an electricity-generating plant of some sort? Did they have a large flywheel of some sort that generated some electricity?

GN: They never generated any electricity while I was involved in the operation. The big Corliss engine was used to run the line shaft to power the individual machines in the sawmill.

OS: What did you call it? The big core engine?

GN: Corliss.

OS: Corliss.

GN: That's the make of the engine that the great big flywheel and the big belt.

OS: Okay, how do you spell that?

GN: C-O-R-L-I-S-S.

OS: Corliss, okay.

GN: They took that out, I don't know what year, and that time, put a lot of electric motors in, and did require additional power from the Montana Power Company.

OS: I see. Okay.

GN: Now I don't know that they didn't generate electricity at one time, or some time, but not in my time.

OS: Not very much, you're saying. I see.

GN: The change to electricity was a change—they just put individual motors on each of these machines, rather than run it off of belts from the power from the Corliss engine.

OS: I see, and I suppose the price of electricity was fairly reasonable back then, too.

GN: They considered it reasonable at that time. I don't think they do now, but— [laughs]

OS: I was going to say, it's probably changed. [laughs]

GN: Yes.

OS: They must've considered it reasonable back then to have gone to those engines.

GN: Well, Montana Power had to put a new substation across the river from the plant in order to handle it.

OS: Just to service the demand there.

GN: Right.

OS: The three main saws that you mentioned, now, were those part of the expansion? Did they come out in the '60s?

GN: No. No. The three-head rig sawmill has been there for years and years.

OS: I remember going through, seeing rough lumber, rough logs coming into these, there were three—

GN: Three carriages.

OS: We stood up on a gangway, and there were three of these things, and there was a little guy down in the cage, and they'd move these logs around with these large hydraulic hands. What do you call them?

GN: Dogs.

OS: Dogs?

GN: Well, we used to call them niggers. [laughs] As a brand, I think they still do. It's a steam nigger. It's handled by the sawyer in the box.

OS: He's the one that's down in and you can't really see him.

GN: In the box, yes. The carriage goes by in front of him.

OS: Back and forth and he shapes the log.

GN: Yes. He changes the [unintelligible], the carriage goes by and puts it through the saw, and he turns it to get the best that he can out of it.

OS: And that's what you mean by the three main saws, then. They were telling me that people used to ride those things beforehand?

GN: Used to have setters on them.

OS: What do you call them?

GN: Setters.

OS: Setters?

GN: So they set it forward every time on the signals from the Sawyer. He would signal what he wanted to do, when he wanted to them to turn it, and they would, well originally they'd just turn it by hand, with [unintelligible].

OS: This huge piece of wood, they would—

GN: They would fall back, then of course, they had steam power there, they would fall back and then they would put it back in place.

OS: They'd guide it.

GN: Yes.

OS: With the steam [unintelligible]. Okay, I understand. That's what you mean by the three main saws, I understand that.

GN: Then there's a, at the present time, there's a small log, what they call a beaver, in there, which has lots of small logs.

OS: I think I saw that you can make two by fours or two by sixes out of one, they just come shooting out at one time.

GN: Run it right straight through.

OS: That's right, I do remember. Bob LeProwse took me through. I think I remember that being called the beaver, yes. The house plant, where houses were constructed in sections, that came about in the '60s, too?

GN: Yes.

OS: Where were they sold? Nationwide, just in the state here, or—?

GN: Nationwide. Some was sold as far away as Alaska, unfortunately [laughs], they had problems with that.

OS: I don't understand, what do you mean by that? Were they suited for the Alaskan climate or—?

GN: They were suitable for it, but they had problems with the unions there, and other problems. They were pre-fabricated in sections and were suitable for any place, this is one. This house was pre-fabricated in Bonner, by sections. It was an up and down operation. What I mean is that it wasn't the most profitable operation that we ever had for sure.

OS: Yes. What about the laminating beam plant?

GN: Laminating beams was more profitable, and two by four, two by six, two by eight, two by tens, two by twelves were laminated, glue laminated together, and made into beams of various shapes and they were used all over the West. We were pretty competitive in that.

OS: Truss plant?

GN: That just made roof trusses, mainly two by four roof trusses. The molding plant made window moldings, door moldings, various kinds of door moldings.

OS: Let's see, have we talked about the main products in the '60s then? Molding plant, the house plant, the truss plant, the laminating plant, the packaging—of course packaging, that's not necessarily a plant, that's just a process that they—

GN: Yes, that's just a part.

OS: I guess that kind of takes care of the '60s then. Is there anything else that comes to your mind now about the '60s from what we've talked about here?

GN: Not really, offhand, I can't think of anything that's spectacular.

OS: Can you say a few things about the teepee burner? Do you know when that was discontinued?

GN: I can't remember the date, but I know when they were going to blow it up [unintelligible].

OS: They literally blew it up?

GN: They tried to dynamite it, it was made out of brick. The original one.

OS: The original teepee burner was made out of brick?

GN: It wasn't a teepee burner quite like they have now, it had straight sides on it. The manager at Bonner at that time got concerned that some of the bricks were falling in, and they thought the whole thing was going to fall in, and then when they wanted to demolish it, why, they had a heck of a time getting it down. [laughs] Then, in its place, they put up a regular teepee burner, the conical type that you see. Then eventually, as we started selling and using all of the waste material, either for fuel there or sale to the pulp mill, they discontinued the use of the teepee burner, and converted it into fuel storage for the boilers at Bonner. They put a lye bottom in it, a chain bottom in it.

OS: What would they put in [unintelligible]?

GN: Hot fuel, ground up—

OS: Chips? Sawdust?

GN: Not chips as you understand them, that you go to the pulp mill, but the bark and the other material they couldn't make into saleable pulp chips.

OS: I see, they would just store it in there.

GN: Store it in there for use as fuel.

OS: They would burn it later on and produce steam.

GN: Produce steam, right.

OS: I see, okay, okay. Now, tell me, are we talking about two teepee burners? Was there an old one that was finally replaced? Or was this brick-laden one finally knocked down?

GN: They knocked that one down and replaced it with a sheet metal, conical teepee burner.

OS: I can't remember, do they still have one out there now?

GN: No, they tore that all out and put in a big fuel storage complex there that is considerably different, but the purpose is the same, to store the fuel for the boilers. You have to have it stored when you're not producing, say over a weekend, you still have to run your boilers, and you have to store the fuel.

OS: Let's move on then, to the 1970s, and tell me what you can about any personal observation, and then just an overall observation on the sale of Anaconda to U.S. Plywood, which later became Champion International. Did you know about the sale beforehand, did it catch you by surprise? Did most people know what was going on?

GN: Nobody that I know of, except the general manager of Anaconda forest products, Bob Sheridan, and the personnel manager of the Bonner operations, Rick Sherwood, they're the only two that I think knew in advance. There have been rumors, well as a matter of fact, there had been people from other operations, other lumber companies had looked at the plant, but no one that I know of at Bonner, except them, knew in advance. The personnel officer happened to be in New York at the time of the final agreement, and he was sworn to secrecy. He did know ahead of time and I'm sure that the general manager knew some ahead of time, but as far as most employees—I was called along with the other supervisors to the Missoula office, and the vice president from New York advised us the morning that they changed ownership.

OS: While I was talking to Mr. [Ernie] Corrick, I asked him the date and he rattled off June 27, 1972.

GN: That's correct. June 27?

OS: Perhaps it was the 26th.

GN: I would've called it the 10th [laughs].

OS: The 10th of June? I don't know, he wanted to say that that was the day that people were terminated by Anaconda Company.

GN: Somewhere, they've got the information. It's written someplace. No, I think it was May the 10th of '72. [It was June 26.]

OS: I know that negotiations had been going on for a while, but I don't know just when.

GN: The people at Bonner, the supervisors, weren't terminated abruptly.

OS: They were not?

GN: They changed hands, but we still remained employees of Anaconda for some little period after that, and they ran the sawmill but stopped the logging, terminated the logging, and then ran every stick of lumber out of the whole plant.

OS: When was the logging stopped?

GN: Soon after the sale, but I don't know just when. Then they ran all of the logs that they had through, then they dried it all, ran it through the planer, then each operation shut down in sequence until they had all of the lumber gone, and then each person was terminated under—the salaried employees were terminated under some kind of formula that they had developed in New York. Then, Champion offered employment to most of the salaried employees as new employees.

OS: Well by then had they determined to keep the sawmill then? When they offered the employment, had at that point Champion said that they were going to retain the sawmill?

GN: When I went to work for them, they had decided that they were going to continue the sawmill. At the time they purchased it, there was some thought of discontinuing the lumber operations, and going to just stripping the plywood.

OS: There was some thought of that, you're saying?

GN: Right.

OS: In '72, at some point, the must've concluded that for some reason they wanted to keep the sawmill.

GN: They sent a team and looked it over, looked at all the cruise information they had as far as the timberlands were concerned and decided, I guess, that there was a certain amount of timber that went better through a sawmill, [unintelligible] the plywood plant. So they continued the sawmill.

OS: Can you speculate as to why Anaconda sold the company?

GN: Yes. They were in trouble in Chile, they lost the Chilean operation and needed money.

OS: Mining operations?

GN: Right.

OS: Nationalization of the mines in Chile.

GN: That's right.

OS: I see.

GN: They lost a lot of money; that was the principal source of Anaconda's income, the parent company, was the Chilean operation.

OS: So this was really small potatoes out here, then. As far as they were concerned.

GN: As far as they were concerned. Well all of those millions of dollars in value that they could sell, to get cash.

OS: Yes. You mentioned that you were a production manager at Bonner in '64 until '72; how did you job change then in '72? You continued as production manager of the sawmill?

GN: They called me lumber production manager, and I was in charge of the sawmill operations. They tore down the molding plant, and they didn't tear the laminating plant down, but they took over the building for part of the plywood plant. Built the big new plywood plant, but they put me in charge of the lumber operations, the sawmill operations.

OS: I've heard the sawmill was seven acres? The roof covers seven acres?

GN: That's the lumber storage building.

OS: Oh, that's the lumber storage building, seven acres?

GN: Yes.

OS: And plywood?

GN: Plywood is more than that, but I don't remember how big.

OS; I want to say I heard 22 acres.

GN: Well, whatever.

OS: It could be.

GN: I wasn't in charge of the plywood.

OS: You didn't have anything to do with—

GN: No. I don't remember what it was.

OS: How was the transition when people were hired back? If I was terminated by one company, by Anaconda, for instance, I'd feel badly about that, and I'd probably feel very anxious about what would happen to me. I'd be curious whether I should stay on with another company, with Champion.

GN: That's exactly my feelings.

OS: Was that the way most people felt about it?

GN: It was a shock to me, I don't know about most people, but it was certainly a shock to me. I didn't expect at that age to be abruptly out of a job. In fact, I looked for other employment.

OS: You did?

GN: Even after they offered me a position there. I looked around to see whether there was something that I would want to do better. I even went to Washington, D.C., had an offer there [laughs]. This is a tribute to Bill Butler and Bill Weiland, I think, it's a good thing they sent the people they did into that operation as managers.

OS: It's a good thing that Champion sent the people [unintelligible].

GN: Right, because they handled it pretty well, the transition of it. After all of the traumatic experience that the people had there, why, they, I think, sent the right people in.

OS: You say Bill Butler?

GN: Bill Butler, yes. And Bill Weiland who—

OS: Bill Weiland?

GN: Was the Chilean operation? retired not too long ago.

OS: Just trying to get the names. I don't know who they are, but I just wanted to. But you think that they were sort of like oil on a troubled water, or something?

GN: Yes. They were both good lumberman and capable people.

OS: They had been with Champion before?

GN: Oh yes.

OS: Once Champion came in, I guess it was December of '73 was the first production of the plywood factory.

GN: Probably.

OS: Again, your connection with strictly the sawmill, did things change? Get better? Get worse? Maintain the same course when Champion came in?

GN: Well the type of log that went to the sawmill changed dramatically because they were taking the, what was we considered as good peelers, out of the log production, and putting it in the plywood plant. So the type of log that went in the sawmill was different, although at that time, and I presume still, most of the ponderosa pine went to the sawmill because it was more valuable as lumber than as plywood.

OS: Now before that you would get fir and larch and everything?

GN: Fir, larch, pine, everything. About a third of each one.

OS: With Champion then, you found that you were getting more ponderosa pine then?

GN: Yes, they got the best of the ponderosa pine and the worst of the other species. [laughs]

OS: Now why would that be? Why would you get the best of the ponderosa and the worst of the others?

GN: Well, you get the best of the ponderosa pine because it's more valuable as lumber. They couldn't peel it and make as much money as they could make it in the sawmill.

OS: So why would they give you the worst of the fir and larch then?

GN: What made good peelers, they took out. That's the best, and that would be the best for lumber too.

OS: I see, I see. Sort of the dregs then?

GN: That's right, of the fir and larch but [unintelligible].

OS: I see, I see.

GN: So that did change.

OS: How did that change the working environment? I'm not sure I mean working environment, how did that affect operations or production then? Did it decrease it? Did it slow it? Did it increase it?

GN: Well, it decreased the value of the fir and larch, but it held up the value of the ponderosa.

OS: Now pine, by and large, is not a good peeler, it isn't good for plywood. It's difficult to peel or—?

GN: It's not difficult to peel.

[interviewer and interviewee talk over each other]

GN: It doesn't have the strength, but it is more valuable as boards.

[audio cuts out for a moment]

OS: Okay, we were talking about pine, larch, fir and one being more suited for boards than the other, and you were saying that pine is better suited for lumber.

GN: Right.

OS: It has a higher value.

GN: A higher value as lumber.

OS: Okay. The sale took place in '72, and you retired in '77. Can you make any broad kinds of statements regarding that period of five years, I suppose, that you were at Champion? Were there any changes that we haven't talked about here? Any changes in operation, or the style?

GN: Bill Butler, who had been manager there, was promoted and Bill Weiland was made manager. At that time, they added the additional responsibility of the Silver City operation out of Helena. So I then was in charge of what they call the Montana lumber operations. So that was a change.

OS: What was the style of working for Champion, as compared to Anaconda? Was there, I say, I style or a mood or a spirit?

GN: Well there were always, I think with most of the supervisors, there was always resentment of the fact that they didn't just take over the employees that were there. The ones that they

wanted as long-time employees instead of what they did, they just took them over as brand new employees and wiped out most of their vacation benefits and these kind of things. There was considerable resentment of that. Some of it they changed while I was there, and I understand, since I retired they restored all of those benefits to the salaried people.

OS: Restored the benefits that they enjoyed under Anaconda?

GN: Well added back their years of service in order to calculate these things like vacations.

OS: I see. How did benefits compare? Were benefits from Champion about the same as benefits from Anaconda or—?

GN: Anaconda had a little bit better stock purchase deal which, to me, was important. The stock saving plan where you bought into the company.

OS: Sure.

GN: I don't know. The people that were involved with Champion operations here were high-class lumber people. I don't know what else to say about it.

OS: Well I'm trying to think now if there's any other changes. Champion, of course, made dramatic changes, in the sense they built a plywood plant. Did they scale down? Did they streamline or add anything, any new kind of operation or new kind of production measure to the sawmill while you were there?

GN: Well, yes, we kept trying to increase the efficiency of the sawmill and then they did install new machines, that did some of that.

OS: Do any come to mind, any certain kinds of machines?

GN: Well, they shut down one. The small log mill was separate at the time that they sold the plant, it was a small log mill that took the smaller logs and processed them. They moved that into the sawmill building, and that's the beaver that you saw.

OS: The beaver, that was separate, that was someplace else.

GN: The beaver was in another location, yes.

OS: I see. Since Champion bought up, the beaver was put inside the large sawmill.

GN: That's correct. Made for a crowded operation, but all of the logs came in—one of the reasons for that is they moved the big, new log yard on the opposite side of the plant, on the plywood side of the plant and all the logs are coming from that way. The small log mill was

where they couldn't really couldn't get the logs to it very handy, so they combined the operation, put in that log conveyor and brought them all into the big sawmill operation.

OS: What else would they have done that would have maybe changed or altered or increased efficiency? Did they more or less figure though, in a larger sense, that the sawmill was a pretty reasonable operation the way it was?

GN: Well, I think everybody recognizes that the three head rigs were beginning to be obsolete, because of the size of the logs, eventually, they're decreasing in size.

OS: What do you mean by the head rig, you mean the three big saws?

GN: The three big saws. As we went along we changed some, but the main operation of those has remained the same for 50 years, I guess. They are now making changes, [unintelligible] as I understand, in conversation with people, they're trying to take out one head rig and put in a new automated system. [Unintelligible] happen to all of them.

OS: And that's easier to do as the logs decrease in size?

GN: Well, it's more essential to the [unintelligible] wood when the logs decrease in size.

OS: Oh I see.

GN: They're going to computerize their handling of logs on the, they may not even be handling [unintelligible].

OS: Those three main saws, how long have they been there?

GN: Well, maybe since 1919 when the sawmill burned down, I don't know.

OS: Really? And they've just kind of added machines and operations and improved—

GN: Improved other things, but then, as you say, they took the setters off the head rig, and there used to be setters on there, and automated that and gave it all to the sawyer. The system has been used for a hundred years, I guess. Hundreds of years.

OS: So, in a sense, any changes that Champion would have made after '72 would have been fairly minor ones. Moving the beaver process [unintelligible].

GN: Well they're not dramatic like the building of the plywood plant, or anything like that, that's right. But they did try to keep up to date on those, as well as they could, without too much expense.

OS: Well, I'm out of questions, and I'm just curious if there's anything that comes to mind that you'd like to say that would summarize anything that wasn't said, or if there's a personal comment that you have, one way or the other.

GN: I can't think of anything more now.

OS: Is there anything that's happened since '77 now, we're in 1984, that's what, seven years. Are they operating things the way you'd like to see them operate things over there now? [laughs] Have there been a lot of changes?

GN: I don't follow it closely. I have a feeling they're going to have trouble supplying logs to the plant but that [unintelligible].

OS: It's getting smaller and smaller and smaller. As a forester, that's your view.

[Break in audio]

OS: This ends the interview with Mr. George Neff.

[End of Interview]