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Joe Boyer of Frenchtown, interviewed by Jim Peterson
[Mr. Boyer was born approx. 1910]
Tape 91-1

JP The first question I want to ask is how long [have] you and your family lived in the valley? The Frenchtown valley?

JB I was born and raised here in Frenchtown and I'm 67 years old so that would be 67 years that we've lived here. What else would you want to know?

JP I meant when [did] your family come here? I'd known that you'd grown up in the area.

JB [My] grandfolks came here in 1863 and settled in the Frenchtown area, and they started working for a sawmill. I don't recall the name of the sawmill, but he worked two years, then [granddad] bought a ranee from Louis Brown in 1865. That's [from] the records that I've got. I've got the old records of the ranch that my granddad had bought and I've bought them from my uncle and they were recorded, in my granddad's name in 1865. The deal was that he kept Mr. Brown and his wife as long as they lived on the ranch with them, and they reserved the rights to keep a milk cow and a place for a garden for their own use. The reason they came to this valley, was [as] I understand it, they heard there was a lot of mining going on in the early days around here, and there was also pretty good farming ground and a lot of saw mills in this area. This was more or less all a French community at that time when all these older folks settled in here.

JP The place that you are on right now, is this the same as your granddad's?

JB Yes. The same place that I've got now is the same as my granddad had in 1865. It stayed all those years in the same name, Boyer name, it has never changed names. It's always been known as the Boyer ranch.

JP The Joe Boyer ranch?

JB Yes

JP I guess what is was going to say next isat the time of your relatives, what was the area like? Can you ever remember hearing your dad or anybody talk about it? Is the countryside still much the same?

JB An awful [lot of] lumber. . . .trees have been cut for lumber, and cleared [which] made larger acres for farming. It used to be thicker [with] trees than it is today. A lot of it

has been cleared off in this valley around Frenchtown. I [don't] know exactly. . . . the years that they cut the timber off, but it would have been in the early years. I remember there used to be several different sawmills in different areas. There used to be one up at what they call Who [?] creek and Huson and there used to be one at Six Mile. The one at Six Mile was there on the Dufrense Ranch and the one near it used to be Donlan. Old Ed Donlan used to be in with somebody else, I don't recall the name. . . . the one near Frenchtown. Also in Frenchtown there was a flour mill built. That's years ago. There used to be a small one at Mill Creek and then they moved it into the town of Frenchtown. There used to be a pretty good size flour mill, the one that was built right in Frenchtown.

JP Back then how many people were in Frenchtown, would you say? Right now there is about 150.

JB Yes, I judge in those early days there might have been fifty families scattered around the valley right around Frenchtown.

JP Would you say a lot of the older families are still around Frenchtown?

JB No, there [aren't] too many old families left. There's not very many. I couldn't say just how many, but I don't think there would be over a dozen to twenty or twelve to twenty families of the original. That wouldn't be the old timers, that would be some of the children or grandchildren of the old settlers.

JP Can you remember many of the names that are still around?

JB Some of the oldest that are around today, Pete Bison, Henry LaVoie and then there's the Hamels, the one that is still on the ranch is Flore. [Hamel] Ed passed away and Blanche is in a home, but Flore is still on their home ranch. It's really one of the oldest family [ranches] left. It would be there right in Frenchtown, Floorer Mill and there's some Lucier's that would be quite old. They'd be in their 70's or 75 maybe in that neighborhood, and then a lot of younger Lucier's. Just like the Boyer's, there's Joe Boyer. He'd be one of the sons of the granddad. I've got the ranch today. Joe, he's 81 I believe Joe is now, and Edmund Rose, he's 75 and he'd be last of the two boys of the original Boyer family of this old ranch. Then there's one girl left and her name is Mary Lucier, [she's] Lena's and that's the only girl left and myself and my sister. Our grandfolks raised us. Our mother died when we were just little babies and that would have been in 1912 when my mother died and her grandfolks raised us on this ranch known as the Boyer ranch.

JP Do you know when Frenchtown was started, or how it was

started, or why it was started?

JB To my knowledge, what I can recall the old timers talking about was that they came around here mostly for mining. There was a lot of mining up on Cedar Creek, up at Superior, and Martina, up the Nine Mile. There was a lot of mining around Helena and Phillipsburg, and Butte was known as the richest hill of the world, but it was I think at one time, known as the richest hill in the worked, the mine in Butte.

JP Do you know what they mined around here? Was it gold or was it silver?

JB There was a lot of gold. They found a lot of gold in the area around here in the early days, especially around Cedar Creek and Martina. [At] Martina there was some silver, but in [those] early days the silver wasn't rich enough to be worth [your] while mining because they hadn't found a lot of leads of silver.

JP Before you took over the ranch, you had a lot of work with the Forest Service. You knew a lot about the Remount up Nine Mile. How long did you work with the Forest Service?

JB In 1928 they used to have the station in back of Frenchtown, in fact [at] the old Ed Donlan Ranch. If I recall, that creek up there was named Boot Creek. It's next to Rainbow Creek.

JP Was Rainbow Creek what they call Relman Creek now?

JB Relman Creek, yes. I worked there for Lockie Stewart and Vic Parent when I first worked [for the] Forest Service here. I've learned to pack a little bit from them. They moved the old LoLo Station from Frenchtown to what's known today as the Remount. They bought this ranch from Ralph Schaeffer and I worked for Ralph Schaeffer. Made hay for Ralph before the Remount bought his ranch. Then I worked for the Remount after [they] first bought it. I worked when they built the first barn for horses there, they had a crew of men who hewed out the small trees, like maybe a six inch tree and hewed it down to maybe three, four inches for a plank floor, then they had these barns built and a few years after that they decided to build the original buildings that they [have] today. They built them with cement floors and made really nice buildings. I worked until 1938 in the forests up there, and in 19 days of CC's [Conservation Corps] as I recall, I think it was 1930. That's when we were up there working and they had taken ten of us boys from the CC camp to come and work at the Remount. We were supposed to learn to pack and work around the Remount there, making hay or anything that they had for us to do and that's where I learned quite a bit about packing.

JP Now that whole area up there around the station, [such as] Camp Bernard, did that belong to the Remount from Mr. Schaeffer?

JB No. a lot of that land belonged to the Forest Service, it was their own land. I don't believe there was any private land. There could have been some private land in that area that they were renting or using. What is known as the Remount, today and that was just one ranch. It used to be the old Lumpry Ranch, Pierre Lumpry. That [was the name of the] original ranch before Schaeffer bought it, and then Schaeffer sold it to the Remount.

JP Above here [on] Edith Peak, [they've] torn down a lot of [lookouts]

JB Yes, they tore down pretty near [all of] the old lookouts around here. There used to be old Edith Peak and New Edith Peak, and I worked maintaining trail and telephone line in the early days when I first started to work for the Forest Service. There's two lookouts, Old Edith Peak and New Edith Peak and then there was Stark Lookout up the Nine Mile and there's Burnt Fork.

JP Wasn't Little Blue up there?

JB Yes, there's Little Blue but that was built in 1936 or 1938.

JP How did you pack the wire and [such] that [ran] the telephone? I worked up there, I pack for the Forest Service now during the summer and there's still wire strung from Edith Peak lookout to Mill Creek and down to Ramon Creek and to that Blue Creek that you were talking about.

JB They packed [the wire] on mules and some horses, but it was mostly packed on animals, mules in those days except where ever there was a road to get in, but there [were] no roads on the upper end. It was all packed in by mules mostly and most of that lumber [lumber for the lookouts] was packed in on mules in [those] days. They cut legs out of trees up there and they'd build the framework out of logs and poles and then they'd haul in all the joinces [for the] floor and windows on the animals. I helped pack some lookout lumber with hardy pairs and then Scotter, Howard and then Scotter. We hauled in [lumber] across the river, your Clark Fork River and then Wild Horse lookout.

JP That's just about straight across from the houses, isn't it?

JB Straight across from where we're living. That was quite a sight to see, those mules going through the timber with all that lumber crisscrossing back of the head. [Laughter],

JP I know that for the trail crew now, all we use [are] two

or three and then a lead horse, but about how many did you use then?

JB A string in [those] days was nine mules and your saddle horse.

JP [Including.] the saddle horse.

JB Yes.

JP How many guys did you have working with you? Was it just yourself or [were] there more?

JB A lot of times, you were working by yourself when you were packing for a district or on fires, but sometimes there'd be more than one string; there might be three or four strings on the same fire. [Many] times you were all by yourself. You'd be taking groceries or tools or equipment [to] different places. If you were packing for a district, most of the time you were by yourself. You'd be taking in groceries and supplies for the lookouts and maybe [for] trail crews or telephone crews.

JP The crews were separate [from] the regular trail crews? Did the trail crews usually themselves have any animals with them?

JB Very seldom [would they] keep their own animals. They'd have [a] packer. He'd be the one that would do the packing. The trail crew would tell them what they needed, or call the ranger station, then they'd bring [what the trail crew needed] by truck to a certain point and then the packer picked it up and would take it up to the trail crew or the telephone crew.

JP I know that right now they run about 70, eight head of horses, horses and mules on the Remount. How many did they run, well, back in the 1930's?

JB I believe in those early days the most that I can recall would be maybe four to five hundred head. They had more than that all told because they kept quite a few up [at] Powell Ranger Station and then they later had what they call the winter range up at Perma. That was near Dixon. They tried to raise colts for their own use in the early days. I don't know just how many head they did have, but I'd say maybe 200 head of saddle horses in [those] days. That would include all the horses that they kept to raise colts, and also the horses they used for their strings. They also had some horses for the ranger and assistant ranger to use for their own use.

JP Did you ever work up through the Stark area too? Up through the trails up along there?

JB I covered all the trails starting from Mill Creek and all along the Reservation divide. I covered all [those] trails all

around way to Regal Pass and I packed all of those areas on Stark Mountain, and then we'd go completely around from Mill Creek, to Nine Mile and Soldier Creek. The last one we'd go by Stark Mountain Lookout. then we'd drop down to Nigger Gulch and we'd go across the plateau and then we'd cross over and go into the Petty Creek area and we'd camp there at what they'd called Petty Creek Pasture. That would be right next to where Mose Langpre had that ranch in the later years and then he sold it here just shortly. The station used to have what they called Petty Creek Pass and we'd use that to keep our mules in and then we'd go to Petty Mountain, Wild Horse and Graves Creek. We covered all that area across the river, Rock Creek, Deep Creek.

We'd go up to what they called Blue Mountain --it's what they call it today, I believe, and there [were] all those trails up Hutter Creek, Sherman Creek, Dry Creek and down to Big Flat. Then we'd come on down to the river, it used to be the Footer Ranch. That was across the river practically straight across from us here and that's where we forded the river a lot to go back and forth with the groceries. There was no road down the other side of the river but today they're roads all over.

JP I was going to ask you, I know that from stories I'd heard, there used to be an Indian burial ground up above Stark going north. There were stories about where it was between Stark and Nigger Gulch or it was North Stark and up farther. I was wondering if you'd ever run into it or ever saw it?

JB No, I don't recall. That's something I wouldn't know. No, I don't recall anything about that.

JP I talked to my Dad about this before. I was wondering, through Missoula, I knew that there were a lot of the bitter root [flowers] and that the Indians would come to pick them until even the late 1950s. Did the Indians ever come down from Kalispell through here and work their way down here at all?

JB Yes. In the early days an awful lot of Indians used these areas, especially in Fish Creek area. They'd come down here to hunt what they call White Tail deer and they'd go up Petty Creek into that area and camp in those areas and kill their deer. They would dry their meat on a string—nut stringer. They used to hang it up and let it dry in the sun.

JP Beef jerky?

JB Yes, jerky or jerked meat.

JP Yes, I was going to ask you too, they called this area just above Huson, Six Mile and then the area beyond it Nine Mile. Why? Do you know?

JB The way I recall it, they called Six Mile Creek because it's about six miles from Frenchtown and Nine Mile, they called it Nine Mile, because it was nine miles from Frenchtown. the reason that I always heard. That why they call it Six Mile and Nine Mile.

JP Was there ever very much going on up Six Mile or Nine Mile itself?

JB Nine Mile had an awful lot of mining in the early days. That was up Martina Creek, all through to Nine Mile. They did an awful lot of mining and they found a lot of gold in some areas in the early days, especially, around Martina. They used to have quite a large mine up there and in the early days there was a lot of Chinamen that mined up there. A lot of old stories you hear but I don't recall too many myself, I had heard that they had killed these Chinamen in early days and they had taken what gold they had, but they say in the early days, these Chinamen had found a lot of gold.

JP This is up in Martina?

JB Yes. St. Louis Creek.

JP Was there any mining or anything up Six Mile or was that even a community?

JB To my knowledge there was some mining in that area also but I never did hear of any rich strikes or getting any amount [of gold] to speak of.

JP Did they have much logging out of the Six Mile?

JB Oh, yes. There was a big sawmill there on the ranch that's known as the Dufresne Ranch. That was quite a large sawmill. It was run by water pressure as far as I know. They had water coming down and they used it to run their saw, to cut the timber. That was quite a large mill, There are a lot of old timers around here who worked in that sawmill quite a while. I believe that's one of the oldest families that settled in the early days around Frenchtown. That's why it was known as the Dufresne Ranch to me in later years.

JP Huson had a different name before it was Huson. Do you know why it was called Huson? Was it named after somebody there or?

JB That I don't know. I couldn't say.

JP The next question I guess I'll ask you——was there ever much trapping done around the area around here?

JB Yes, there was a lot of trapping in these early days. Some of them went into the Clearwater trapping--that was up the Fish Creek. The Alberts were known as quite a trapping family. They lived just across the river from where I'm living now. There was quite a family of boys and that was really their line in the winter time, was doing a lot of trapping. Severil[?] Albert, might have heard of his name, he got in a slide up at the Clearwater and he got killed up there.

JP Is that up by Indian Lodge, up the river?

JB That would be right around Indian Lodge, yes, and he used to do pretty good. The reason they'd go back in those areas was to get Martens. They'd get up in those higher areas to get the fur Martens. There were some Martens around Frenchtown. They were way at the head of the Mill Creek maybe and some way up the head of Nine Mile but there were way more Martens than any other fur, and that's the reason some of these folks went to the Fish Creek area and different areas higher up to get those Martens. They were worth more money. There was a lot of beaver and rat trapping along the rivers and sloughs here in the valley. A lot of folks did good. I remember us kids going to school. We used to catch a lot of rats, mink and a few beavers, weasels and coyote, which I did quite a little myself when I was younger. It gave us a few spending dollars in those early days. It was pretty handy to gather a few hides to raise a little money for our school clothes.

JP Where did you take [the furs] once you got them?

JB We usually went to Missoula most of the time or we shipped them to Sears Roebuck.

JP Shipped them to Sears and Roebuck?

JB Yes, and Goldbergs and there was a place in Helena, one in Great Falls and the later years that I trapped, I did just as good right here in Missoula [at a place] known as [Henry] Silver. They paid just as good as taking the trouble and shipping them out. You'd end up with maybe more money right here in Missoula.

JP This is a little bit off the subject, but there's a lot of Elk around this area. Do you know how they got around here?

JB There were elk planted here right in back of the Frenchtown Ranger Station underneath Old Edith Peak. That was in 1925. Then they planted some across the river also and they had closed season in...I don't recall the day or the year that they open the season around here for elk. IT WAS CLOSED!

JP They were planted all around?

JB Yes.

JP How did they ship the elk up here?

JB They had brought them here in trucks.

JP Trucks?

JB Yes. they turned them loose right in back of Ed Donlan's Ranch, that was the old ranger station in those days.

JP Do you know how many they set loose here?

JB No, I don't recall how many they turned loose.

JP I guess part of the next question I'll ask you is about how many schools would you say were around this area between Huson and Frenchtown?

JB Nine Mile? Between Huson and Frenchtown, there used to be a school at Frenchtown, a Catholic school. It was known as the Sisters School and then there was also a public school. I went to school at the Sisters School and I also went to the public school here at Frenchtown. There was also a school at Huson. That's where I started. I went my first three years at the Huson School. Our teacher was Johnny Clemens. His brother had taught school there in the earlier years; Henry. And there was also a school at Six Mile and I don't know if you want to know about the Nine Mile and Stark?

JP Sure.

JB The Six Mile school isn't there anymore and neither is the Huson school but the old Nine Mile school still stands and the old Stark school still stands.

JP Was there any school up by Martina in through that area? Do you know?

JB There used to be a little school there years ago. I don't recall the name. There used to be a school there at Martina but that was really before my time.

JP You have a pretty famous church at Frenchtown. What is it called and when was it built?

JB As far as I can recall, the church here at Frenchtown is St. John's, the Baptist church and people in the valley volunteered to build the original church that's there now. They all gave donations of time to put up this church. As far as I

can recall, it was built in 1864. It was just a small church; this church is a frame church here in Frenchtown now. They celebrated the first year of St. John's Society in 1885. The priest that used to be there when the church was built was Father Trembly. Father Trembly was the original priest at the time that they built the church that stands today. Some of the old timers that I can recall were some of the carpenters. The main carpenters that did donate an awful lot of their time would have been Joseph Napoleon Claude, one of the main carpenters, and also old Charles Rose. He's the grandfather to Charlie, Dan, Raymond, and David. The Rose family which was an old family here in the valley and the Boyer's and the Sears[?] and Deschamps and Reeves. Mose Reeves and Bedards. I can't recall all the old names but those are the ones that I can remember. There used to be some Turmells and Plourdes and they all donated time too. All the Luciers - there was a family of Luciers and there was a family of Plourdes. One of the original old timers of the valley, she is still living. She's 105 years old - Mrs. Plourdes. I went to school with her daughter in Frenchtown, and Mrs. Plourdes was my third and fourth grade teacher when I started in Frenchtown public school. The daughter's name is Mrs. Dan Corr today and her mother lives with her in Missoula.

JP How did they get the lumber for the church itself?

JB They had the sawmills here in the vally and how they finished the lumber, I wouldn't really know. Old timers were awfully good carpenters and finishers. They surely knew how to build

JP There's two railroads running through this part of Frenchtown. Do you know what time the Milwaukee and the Burlington Northern started through here?

JB I recall hearing the old timers say that the Milwaukee started building in 1907-1908 and the Burlington Northern or the Northern Pacific_____I just don't recall the year that it was started.

JP You always hear about the Chinese working on the different railroads. Were there many Chinese immigrants that were working on these railroads?

JB In those early days there were quite a few, yes. They had gangs that the railroad would have to go around. An awful lot of their main work, building on their tracks, and putting in new ties or any work that they had to do. They'd come in here and they had their living quarters in cars - railroad cars.

JP Were these the same Chinese workers that were probably up at Martina after a while, or were they different ones?

JB I believe the one that were up at Martina might have been some of the same but I believe a lot of them came out of Butte in the early days.

JP You mean from the mining town?

JB Yes.

JP I guess the last question I'll ask you is kind of a deep one, but how come so many French decided to settle in this area itself?

JB I believe the reason was that they had friends that had come to this area and told them about it. It seems like they started drifting in here, all these French families and they had some relatives. More and more told their relatives that there was a good chance for a good ranch. A lot of chances for a lot of work and mining. There was a lot of mining and then these railroads were being built. I believe that's why a lot of them came because there was a lot of work around. It seemed like the nationalities all kind of grouped together in the early days.

JP Is this why they called it Frenchtown?

JB I believe that's the reason. Frenchtown was named after all those French families that drifted in here and they were all Frenchmen and they called it Frenchtown.

[END OF TAPE #91-1]