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Oral History Number: 119-004a

Interviewee: Jack L. Demmons

Interviewer: Orlan J. Svingen

Date of Interview: May 7, 1984

Project: Champion International Corporation Centennial Oral History Project

Orlan J. Svingen: My name is Orlan Svingen, and I'm at Bonner School. It's May 6, 1984 [actually, May 7], and I'm speaking with Jack L. Demmons. This is being done in conjunction with a research project for Champion International, who is sponsoring a centennial study into the 100 years of the Bonner mill, in Bonner, Montana. I will next just ask Mr. Demmons to describe his association with Bonner, beginning from its outset to the present. I'd also like him just to introduce himself and name and if he'd spell it please, and just begin with his earliest association with Bonner work to the present.

Jack L. Demmons: Jack L. Demmons, that's D-E-M-M-O-N-S, and I'm the district superintendent for the Bonner School District number 14. I was born on June 15, 1930, at West Riverside, and grew up in this community. I moved during 1942, to Piltzville, went to Bonner School and then took my high school training in Missoula, and later on at the University of Montana. My father was a river boss at the Bonner Mill for years, and died there actually in 1950. The Demmons family came to this area, originally, in the 1800s, from New Brunswick, Canada. My mother grew up in the Johnson Creek area above Bonner. She came from Holland, and had settled in the area around Victor before moving to the Johnson Creek area about three miles above Bonner.

OS: Let me ask you some fairly general questions. I'd like to—since the study is beginning with, in a sense, the mid-1930s—let me ask, I know that if you were born as you say, 1930, you're not gonna have real good memories about the '30s, but perhaps you can give the memories or some of the things beginning there. Work our way forward. For instance, what can you say about the 1930s? Do you remember from individuals, from family associations and so on?

JD: In the 1930s, that I recall, there were tough times around the Bonner area. The Depression years, or coming out of the Depression. I know some families now, even though they were working, hunting game out of season, that was not unusual but they did a lot of fishing also, and provided for themselves in many ways. I mentioned about the gardens they had at Bonner, and all the families including ours, had a large garden. There's a plot anyway that they utilized every year. People, generally speaking, I'd say, were kind of happy-go-lucky. There were, again, hard times, but it was very interesting period of history. The people seem to stick together; it seemed like a closed society in the Bonner area in the '30s. As I mentioned to you, if someone worked in Missoula and lived out in this area and didn't work at the mill, we thought it was rather strange.

OS: I'm curious too now, was your father working then, in the '30s, in the mill then?

JD: He was the river boss. In fact, he was on the last log drive in 1926.

OS: Okay, and how long did your father work in this area?

JD: Worked over 35 years out here.

OS: Let's see, by the time of World War II, do you have any recollections as to how the war effort may have affected the mill? Do you know if people tended to stay here, did they have any special consideration to maintain logging concerns, lumber concerns, and mining concerns during World War II?

JD: Yes, as I recall, there was stepped up activity at the mill during World War II. A lot of people around here did go to war. In fact, every single able-bodied man, what did I know of, and a lot of gals too. It's an interesting question, because a lot of the old-timers who were, of course, from the old countries and they were very proud of the sons and daughters being in the service serving their new country. I'll never forget that, it was a very prideful time, even though it was a terrible time.

OS: At what point did a person stay at the mill and continue working, and when were they regarded as obligated to join the Armed Forces? Was there a time, or a date, or an age?

JD: No, because I know some were in their 30s when they went into World War II.

OS: Some in their 30s went? I see.

JD: They were aged 30-35.

OS: And you said there was stepped-up activity?

JD: Right.

OS: I'm trying to think now if—

JD: Of course there was more mining activity, and a lot of the timber out here went to the mines, even in those days.

OS: Well I'm sure that, even with the heavy support of Anaconda Company, that there was a very—it was regarded as a crucial war industry, I'm sure. Did people, do you think they pulled together in this period, in World War II?

JD: Very much so, in the Bonner area they did. Very, very much so. A lot of cooperative effort out here.

OS: Yes. Do you remember now, in the '30s—and let's just kind of lump this together: '30s and '40s—was there any kind of major construction of new buildings or any kind of new operations out here that you're aware of? Or not?

JD: Not in this area that I recall, no.

OS: And during the '30s and '40s, could you estimate a fraction as to how much was being produced? In terms of the mining, framing timber, and so on versus just logging?

JD: No, I wouldn't know.

OS: Okay, that's just a wild guess. Okay, another question then. After the war, when people returned, were many of the fellows who had joined the army, navy, marines and so on, were they incorporated back into the job? How did post-World War II affect the mill?

JD: Right, many people that came back from the military service, and did return to the saw mill, then shortly after there was about a six-month strike that affected a lot of people. Some moved away and never did return. Most of them did stay, and managed to tough it out.

OS: Now tell me, you mentioned a strike after World War II?

JD: Yes, this was as I recall, see somewhere, I don't recall the exact date, '45, '46, it was in that area.

OS: It was a six-month strike?

JD: Six-month strike, right. A lot of people went out and hunted illegally at that time, to help make a go of it,

OS: Do you recall the issues of the strike? At this point?

JD: I don't, no, I think it was wages. I believe it was basically wages.

OS: Was it hard for someone to get their job back, or was it easy to get a job back after World War II?

JD: It was rather easy. I think ACM was looked upon, more or less, like the paternal father out here. I just might interject something—I say, still have never heard anyone speak against ACM, including my dad, back in those days. Even after the war.

OS: There are some obvious reasons for that, I suppose, but why don't you expand on that? What accounts for this fairly positive view toward ACM?

JD: Well, I think it was the attitude of the management toward the people. Management, generally speaking, was well-liked, they did work hard for the men. There weren't many benefits in those days. I know my dad, if he had retired, would not have had any retirement, only social security. But there was a loyalty to the company, because again, the general feeling of management towards the people. They tried to help them out in any way they could, but again retirement at that time, was not known.

OS: There was no retirement program?

JD: Not at that time, no. I don't remember just when that came in.

OS: They would have social security then though, wouldn't they?

JD: Right.

OS: Okay. Let's move to the '50s then. Now you may have said earlier in the tape, here, but I don't remember exactly, you've grown up in the area, you were schooled in the area then?

JD: Right.

OS: Where did you, let's say your first 12 years of school, was it here in Bonner itself or—?

JD: Eight years in Bonner and then four years in Missoula County High School, and then four years at the University of Montana.

OS: I see. Okay, born in the '30s, so by the '50s, you would've been in your 20s and probably done at the University in the early '50s then?

JD: Right, I graduated in '52, went on to serve for six years in the infantry, before getting out of the service.

OS: Were you involved in Korea then?

JD: Yes, the latter part of Korea.

OS: What can you say about the 1950s then? It sounds like, if you were in there for six years, you were gone from the area for six— you were obviously gone for six years. Is there any way of characterizing the 1950s? Anything in particular that comes to mind?

JD: No, not really. We were seeing more and more people working at the mill who lived outside the district.

OS: Okay, that's real important. I think I remember you, we listened to a tape and the tape was entitled, "The Grassroots Tribute: The Story of Bonner, Montana." And I remember hearing some figures, I jotted them down rather quickly, that perhaps in 1950, 75 percent of the families who had students at Bonner were employed that the mill. And then by 1980, I think, perhaps that number dropped down to 35 percent?

JD: Right.

OS: Okay now, so you're saying, in the '50s, is when this decline is beginning to be noticeable.

JD: The latter part of the '50s, especially with more people in the Missoula area moving in and driving back and forth to work.

OS: What accounts for that? Do you know?

JD: I don't know. I think more people were buying their homes. Of course you couldn't buy a house in Bonner; that still holds true today. Milltown, the property is owned by the company, although the houses are privately owned. West Riverside and Piltzville were about the only areas where the people could own the land and the homes.

OS: I see. Well I didn't know that now. Let me just go back, this sounds important, now. A person could not actually buy a home in Bonner?

JD: No, still cannot.

OS: You still cannot, to this day?

JD: Still a company town.

OS: I see, I see. What happened? What made people choose not to live here then? Just because they wanted to buy a home?

JD: I think that's just part of it, that's only one reason. There's only so much land. Today, people like to move out here, but it's hard to find a place to build.

OS: There were other areas beside Missoula you mentioned? What were they now? The areas outside of Bonner?

JD: Right up the Blackfoot, but even up in the Bitterroot, some people live up there and commute back and forth. Up to the Clinton area to the east, and some up by Frenchtown, even, come here to work also.

OS: I see. Well that's important to understand. When did your association begin with Bonner school?

JD: Let's see, after six years in the military service, I came back and went back to school again to go into education, then went to Alaska for 12 years. So I was gone, and my only association with Bonner is when I came back in the summertime each year, from Alaska, to continue studies at the University of Montana. It was quite a gap there of 12 years in the '60s up to 1974.

OS: In the '60s, there was a great deal of interest in expansion, and Anaconda did a number of things to expand the operations. Are you aware of that? Do you know of the impact of the expansion? Do you know what it did to the employees and the company and so on? Are you aware of that?

JD: I'm not too familiar with it. I would have to pass on that one.

OS: Okay, because I know that there was a great deal of increased electrification, and the generating plant was, I think, retired or no longer used. There were a number of advances that were accomplished in the '60s.

JD: Right.

OS: But, by and large, you're not real familiar with it?

JD: No, since I was pretty much up north at that time.

OS: Okay, so you returned then, to Bonner school in 1974?

JD: Right.

OS: Did you come as a principal? Did you kind of work your way up through the ranks?

JD: They asked me to come back and take Mr. [Leo] Musberger's place as the district superintendent. He was retiring in '74.

OS: I see, so you came back as district superintendent, and that's what you've been since—

JD: Ten years, for ten years.

OS: Tell me then, about any observations you have between 1974 and today, regarding the plant and its operation, whatever you can, its social and cultural impact on the people in Bonner.

JD: I think it's been a good one, I haven't noticed any real—all the real changes during the 10 years, the company has continued to operate steadily. I remember they had several weeks when it had a four-day shift when that recession came along, but actually the people here have been working steadily. The company's had a very steady influence on these folks.

OS: You mentioned the four-day shift. I'm not aware of that now, do you know when that—

JD: It was about three years ago, but just for a few weeks they worked four days.

OS: This was about in '81 then?

JD: Right. Otherwise, they worked right straight through though, without any shut down.

OS: What do you know about the shift of ownership, when U.S. Plywood, which became Champion International, bought out Anaconda Company? What do you know about that transition, and can you say anything about that?

JD: Only from what I've heard, and some people are unhappy at the beginning, and some people here in the district never got their jobs back. Some were very disappointed about that, but most of them returned to work. Some people told me they were skeptical about the role that Champion would play, whether it would be the same as ACM, that is a feeling towards people. From what I've seen, the support that Champion has given has been outstanding, that includes the school. We've been very fortunate in having Champion as a neighbor. There were new people brought in from the coast, I know, and from elsewhere to work at the plant, but they've become permanent residents for the most part.

OS: Mr. [Ernie] Corrick mentioned to me that, it was an estimate, nothing more, that perhaps eventually as many as 85 percent of the individuals working for Anaconda, eventually became rehired with U.S. Plywood and later on Champion International. I'll just refer to it as Champion, we all know that the name changed. With, of course, U.S. Plywood, we got the plywood production out here, and I'm making a guess now, perhaps you know, are there perhaps 1,000 people employed at Champion right now?

JD: Yes, I think it's slightly in excess of 1,000.

OS: A little excess? Now with the plywood end of Champion, did you see an influx of students here? Or that didn't push up the enrollment here at all, I don't suppose?

JD: No, the influx we had were from the new trailer courts that came into being on West Riverside. With the recession too, we had people leaving some of those courts, which dropped our enrollment, although it's picking back up again. Otherwise, no, I would say there wasn't much difference.

OS: That's an interesting point though, that they would have taken on what amounted to, probably, half again as much of an effort with the plywood plant. But as you say, if people couldn't buy homes here and there was no land for sale, that would not account for, necessarily, increased enrollment. People whose employment increased or swelled the ranks of Champion probably lived elsewhere.

JD: Right, basically that's true.

OS: The school has had a good relationship with the mill, as with Anaconda and with Champion. Is it a major source of the tax base for Bonner School?

JD: Yes, it is a major source for tax purposes.

OS: Is it a single source? Or—?

JD: It's basically the only real industry source in this area.

OS: Are taxes paid outside the area that support the school?

JD: Yes, the property owners, in addition to Champion, and of course a few industries and business in Milltown, West Riverside, but we can't classify those as industries, though.

OS: I've more or less covered the timespan then, in terms of what I've been interested in asking. Let me go back and regress a bit here, and ask, you were born in 1930, and your father was employed at Anaconda? As a, you said as a river—

JD: River boss.

OS: River boss. Are your parents alive?

JD: No, he died of cancer in 1950. He was still working at the time and shortly after he found out, he passed away.

OS: Are there any stories that come to mind when your father talks about his employment, as you can recall? In 1950, you would've been—

JD: I was 20.

OS: 20 years old. Were there any stories that he related, especially, perhaps, in the 1930s and the 1940s about employment? What he did in particular or what the—

JD: Not really. We used to go over and visit at the mill, in those days you could walk through the mill as a youngster and no one would say anything. You could even stand up there in the

sawmill and watch them cut the logs, as long as you kept out of the way. So we pretty well knew what was going on over there. Today it's entirely different because of insurance purposes. The stories were just the stories about the lumberjacks. There were a lot of single lumberjacks around at that time, yet, and of course, they frequented the bars in Milltown for the most part. They were good, hardworking men, and they played hard and they worked hard. I can't recall offhand any special stories right now that my father used to mention.

OS: As far as where you lived, you said West Riverside?

JD: Right.

OS: Were you in a company-owned home then?

JD: No, in West Riverside, you could own a property and a building, whereas in Milltown, again, the property was owned by the company, still is. They paid a small amount of rent to the company, but the homes were privately owned.

OS: I see. What kind of people lived in the homes? What kinds of people would live in the company homes? Just laborers or was there a mixture of laborers and administrative people or—?

JD: Basically laborers, most administrative people back in those days lived in Bonner.

OS: Oh they lived in Bonner? When you say in Bonner, in a company home?

JD: In a company home.

OS: Administrators did too?

JD: Right.

OS: I see. And during World War II, you mentioned that there was a stepped up effort, and you were at that point, between the ages of 10 and 15, roughly. Are there any things that you recall? Was there concern? You mentioned the stepped up effort, what there a kind of commitment on the part of many people to support the war effort?

JD: There was a very deep commitment here, you know, the stamps and saving stamps, and the bonds. Something like a closed society. The feelings of these people, the old timers, from the old country. Probably more of a deep commitment here than in many areas.

OS: Yes, I suspect. We're going to talk about immigration, let me ask you now, are there a lot of immigrants to the area here in Bonner? Did the mill act as a magnet to immigrants in the United States?

JD: Yes it did. Yes, very definitely. On the matter of the loyalty to the—I think it was sort of a natural thing with these people, they were just very dedicated people, I find. A lot of their offspring are the same way today. The school taught loyalty to the country, I never forgot that, and we still do today. We do our best in that area too.

OS: Immigration historians frequently talk about immigrants, perhaps, working harder at being an American, and embracing the kinds of values and loyalties they discover here. Was there a heavy emphasis in your background perhaps, and the background of other first generation children, to embrace and regard and value American society?

JD: Oh yes, very much so.

OS: What is your background, let me ask?

JD: Well Canadian and Dutch.

OS: Okay, I recall that now. But you're saying that there are many immigrants from various parts of the world, Canada for instance, Scandinavian countries?

JD: Basically Scandinavian, many from Canada, but I would say more from Scandinavian countries.

OS: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Poland.

JD: Finland, yes. Many Finnish people were here. Some came from [unintelligible], as I mentioned in the film strip there, when they shut that operation down and moved to the West Riverside-Bonner area. A lot of them had come from the old country also.

OS: Could you find a various languages continuing to be spoken, or did people quickly abandon them and speak English?

JD: No, the old country language was spoken in many of the homes, plus the new language, the American language, and you remember, many old timers, in their dialects, it was very common over at the mill. I worked at the mill also, and I was going to college, quiet some period of time, and there were many accents. One fellow would say—here would be a blizzard coming out of the Blackfoot, and he would say, there would be a lizard coming out the “Lackfoot,” and this was a common—

OS: A lizard coming out the Lackfoot?

JD: Right. [laughs] Couldn't quite get the “B” in there.

OS: Did certain groups get along better with others? Or was there any kind of, did you find, areas where— Did Norwegians tend to live with Norwegians and perhaps the Canadians tend to live with Canadians? Or was there not these little split up neighborhood segments?

JD: That was quite true. The Finnish people, especially, stuck together quite closely. The Norwegians and the Swedish people. I would say those three groups especially, and then the French. The Finnish more than anyone.

OS: The Finnish more than anyone? Now you said the French, were there people coming right from France or were they French-ethnics from other parts of the United States or Canada?

JD: Basically French Canadian, from Ontario and Quebec and the coast provinces too.

OS: You heard a lot of dialects, you say, did you hear much Finnish being spoken? Or French Canadian spoken?

JD: Oh yes, yes. Certainly was. [laughs]

OS: There was a lot of that, I suppose, when—

JD: Very much.

OS: Maybe in fits of anger, you'd hear it most. [laughs]

JD: Oh yes. Yes, and you'd hear some of them shouting at home as well, in the family disputes, you know, you don't want to be in the old—especially some of the Finnish people that lived next to me in West Riverside.

OS: How did the ethnic groups working at the plant respond to the war effort? Certainly, as you run through these, Canada and the Scandinavian countries, for instance, were allies to the United States. Was there a concern for how the war was progressing, and was there the same amount of commitment or was there perhaps more commitment on the part of these people?

JD: I would say more commitment. I knew there were German people here too, and it was the same on their part, no one seemed to worry about them, and there was no need to worry about them.

OS: We hear a lot about German people during World War I being persecuted or prejudice being felt against them. Was there any of this towards the German community in World War II?

JD: None that I recall at all. I'm sure there wasn't.

OS: Regarding the war effort here, were there casualties? Were there a number lost in the war?

JD: Yes, we had, first of all, over 200 who went to war, and six died in combat, that's quite a high percentage when you're say—

OS: A small town.

JD: Yes it was.

OS: What was the population at that point? Would it have been 500 or 1,000 maybe?

JD: Oh, it would be over that. I imagine perhaps a couple thousand, if you're taking the entire area from Piltzville to the Marshall Grade, then up through the Blackfoot, or the lower part of the Blackfoot.

OS: So anything you're saying, 200 enlisted and of those, there were six who died in combat, and that doesn't take into account the casualties and so on, and injuries.

JD: Oh no, many were injured in combat, too, we had pictures of all six of those in the library in the memorial stand.

[Break in audio]

OS: This concludes the interview with Jack Demmons, and one correction: the date for this interview was May 7. At the outset of this tape, I identified it as May 6, but the correct date is May 7, 1984.

[End of Interview]