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Oral History 416-04

Badger Two Medicine Oral History

Interviewee: Hugo Johnson

Interviewer: David Brooks

September 17, 2006

David Brooks: Alright it's September 7, 2006, and I'm David Brooks doing the interviews for the Badger Two Medicine Oral History Project. Today I'm talking to Hugo Johnson. Mr. Johnson, I was hoping you could start out with just a little bit of your own personal background growing up in the area, what got you into the Badger Two Medicine or interested in it.

Hugo Johnson: Okay, I grew up and graduated from high school in Browning and the first time I was in Badger Two Medicine was in 1955. My dad had a contract for the seismograph crew in at Badger Cabin. There was no road into Badger until that time. At that time, the dozer rode in there and that was the starting of the roads in Badger.

Brooks: Can you kind of describe where that Badger Two Medicine cabin is and that road in particular, where it got put in.

Johnson: The road goes up.. There are two ways you can get in there. One comes over from Palookaville and goes over White Rock Pass into Badger. The other one goes up the South Fork of the Two Medicine up to Badger. And after that road was built, a four-wheel drive pickup could go in there for years and a lot of people drove four wheel drives in there and set up their camp. And then the 1964 flood took that road out of there and there was no more road into Badger. And then after, in the late '70s, I think, four-wheelers started going in there and for a lot of years that was fine, but then they just got carried away and they're really ruining that country now. There's roads and trails and everything all over. The seismograph trail just went to Badger. Then when I was outfitting in Schafer Meadow in the '70s, they walked two D-6 Cats and a scraper in through Badger and up over Lodge Pole and down in to Schafer to lengthen the air

strip there and that's how the road got from Badger Cabin up towards Lodge Pole is from bringing them two D-6's in to do the work at Schafer Meadows.

Brooks: So there was a airstrip in there?

Johnson: There's an airstrip in Schafer Meadows. That's in the.. .Right now it's in the Great Bear Wilderness Area. At that time it wasn't a wilderness. There always was an airstrip at Schafer, but a guy from Missoula name of Randy Lockland had the contract and walked. There were two D-6's in there that lengthened the runway in Schafer and that's how that road got built on up there for the four-wheelers is from that.

Brooks: Who was using the air strip?

Johnson: Oh, everybody. Everybody uses the air strip. In fact, it's still.. .Even though it went into the wilderness, they excluded the air strip there. And a lot of outfitters fly their hunters in; a lot of people fly in there and stay overnight. It's a real popular air strip.

Brooks: Tell me a little bit about your experience or your family's experience outfitting in there from as far back as they did.

Johnson: Well, like I say, my dad, he did outfitting in that area. He packed them seismographers in one year. And then I can't remember what year—it was in the '60s that I outfitted with a friend of mine by the name of Grant Gallup and we outfitted in there for quite a few years. I would outfit in Schafer sometimes and come back and guide for him. I've been back there ever since.. .I don't know of anybody that's spent more time in the Badger Two Medicine than I have.

Brooks: Mostly packing in.

Johnson: Yep. We used to all.. .I still pack in. My friends take four-wheelers but I refuse to ride one and I still pack in horseback all the time.

Brooks: So in the '60s when you were outfitting in there, how many other outfitters were there?

Johnson: There was no other outfitters in there at that time. Right now there's two outfitters: Al Hoge(?) from Choteau and Cody Jackson from East Glacier. But actually neither one of them has been in there for quite a few years, but they still have an outfitters permit for back there. It's hard to outfit back there when there's a lot of four-wheelers. People just don't like to.. Out-of-state hunters don't like to come back there and see four-wheelers running all over. So it's very difficult to outfit now.

Brooks: So in terms of getting business it's hard.

Johnson: Oh yeah. No hunter wants to go back there and think they're way back there and have somebody come roaring up on a motorcycle.

Brooks: What other folks were going in or using the area in the '60s when you were outfitting.

Johnson: There's quite a few people. Local people all use it. Yeah, there's a lot of camps in there at that time. Private guys from Valier and Cutbank and all over would come in there. It was a pretty busy place there.

Brooks: And how was the hunting?

Johnson: It's pretty good hunting in there. As good as any place. I think the four-wheelers are having a definite effect on the game back there. And another thing I don't totally agree with is they have permits back there for livestock to graze. Some areas back there is fine but other areas it's very over-grazed with the livestock. I'm really not opposed to livestock but I think they should be regulated a little better in some of the areas, especially like in Mettler Coulee where the grass is so short in there. There's a fence right there at a place they call Sawmill Flat and one side cows come in and the other side they don't. You hit that fence you can see a definite difference in the grass and I think that has an effect on the elk.

Brooks: Any other places in particular that are getting hit pretty hard?

Johnson: No, just.. .There's four people have permits back there for cows. I don't know exactly who they are. Up around Badger Cabin, they don't really hurt up there. I can't see where they're hurting that too bad. But like I say, Mettler Coulee, that's another lease from the Forest Service. That gets hammered pretty hard and the grass is pretty short in there.

Brooks: So how long did you run your outfitting business in there?

Johnson: Oh, probably for about fifteen years off and on. My friend he was in there. Sometimes I was outfitting more in the Schafer and in the Great Bear Wilderness area, but I'd come out and outfit in there with him once and a while. And now every year for the last, I don't know, fifteen years we go in and spend two weeks in there every year. And then in the summertime we go back there, my family and I, and ride horseback back there.

Brooks: So you said your dad originally packed the seismograph crew in there in '50...

Johnson: '55. He had a team and wagon and packed the stuff from Rising Wolf Ranch into. The camp was just below Badger Cabin.

Brooks: And how long were they in there?

Johnson: Just for the summer. They had a nice camp. They had running pumps and running water and showers.

Brooks: And then tell me again who it was that you mentioned from Missoula that brought the Cats up?

Johnson: His name was Randy Lockland. He was from Missoula. And he just walked them through Badger like into Schafer Ranger Station to lengthen the strip there. And he's the one that

built the road from Badger Cabin up to Big Lodge Mountain and then down Lodge Pole Creek into Schafer Ranger Station.

Brooks: How was he able to build a road into the .I mean that was all National Forest.

Johnson: It's all natural forest, everything, but at that time it wasn't a wilderness area. The Great Bear Wilderness Area wasn't formed yet when he done that. And it didn't really hurt too much from.. .That's more open area in Badger and that road stayed in there, but the rest of it going down Lodge Pole and into Schafer, you can't even see that a Cat ever made that road now. It's just a trail now.

Brooks: But that's the trail that has allowed more ATVs to get in there.

Johnson: Absolutely right. Them ATVs go clear up to the Continental Divide. They go down to, well, they go plumb down.. .They go way off of where there's signs there that says, "Stay on the Trails." They go right around the signs. They got roads every place you look and knapweed every place. And actually the motorcycles are worse than the ATVs. You can hear them. There's supposed to be a noise restriction on them but I don't think the Forest Service enforces it at all and you can hear the motorcycles coming for miles.

Brooks: Well how about that original road that went into the Badger Cabin? That was going across National Forest land too, right?

Johnson: All natural forest.

Brooks: So who commissioned that road, or what was the original purpose of that?

Johnson: To get the seismograph crew in there, the original. Like I said, the Forest Service drove into Badger for years. Then the '64 flood kind of took that road out.

Brooks: But it's been rebuilt. I mean, that's the same road still going in.

Johnson: Yeah, the road was never rebuilt. From over White Rock Pass it was rebuilt down to Badger, but it was never rebuilt from Badger Cabin down to Two Medicine. It comes out just below Summit. That was never rebuilt, it was just.. They fixed the trail again, but it was good enough for the ATVs to get on it.

Brooks: And so that was the seismograph team, that was the U.S. Geological Survey probably?

Johnson: Yeah. I don't know what the name of the seismograph crew actually was, but they seismographed all that.

Brooks: And what ever became of that?

Johnson: They still claim there's oil there, I don't know. Natural gas is more what they're after.

Brooks: I've heard that there was a well, a test well, at least one drilled in there.

Johnson: Not in that area, I don't believe. I think it was down towards Choteau, more in Blackleaf, down in there. There was no wells as far as I know ever drilled up in that area. But there was one proposed well to drill. We tried to get all the leases bought out. I think we just about have them all bought out now. When we get all the leases out, the congress or Conrad Burns promises that they would retire them leases and never re-let them. Now I don't know if it's going to be for twenty years or forever, but we're still working on that.

Brooks: So who's 'we' buying them out?

Johnson: It's a coalition from the Rocky Mountain Front. It's the Montana Wilderness Society in Helena is mostly pushing it. But there's a lot of interested people. We get a big turnout. And the Blackfeet Tribe, they're opposed to any development in there absolutely. I work with Keith Patsy(?) and the Blackfeet Tribe quite a bit on this too. We're definitely trying.. The travel plan

was supposed to have been out four or five months ago and they keep putting it off. We keep working on it.

Brooks: How much do you work with or know some of the folks that live in the Badger Two Medicine.

Johnson: There's nobody lives in there.

Brooks: Well, like, I guess Jim Stuart has the Rising Wolf Ranch. I'm talking about folks like that, Doug Hammil(?). Just folks like that.

Johnson: Yeah I know Doug pretty well. They're opposed to it. Even now, a four-wheeler.. If they would pack their camps in, they still don't destroy a lot of property. You just can't give them an inch, they take a mile. If you let them go in the summertime, you can't even see for the dust from the four-wheelers and motorcycles. And the motorcycles, every time they hit a sandbar some of them they have to spin around about three times and it's just not the place for four-wheelers. In fact, when I was in Washington, I talked to people from different states. And in every state in the union they're having trouble with ATVs. They got so powerful so fast. And they're not all bad, but the bad ones raise heck for the rest of them.

Brooks: And where do you, I mean do you have an idea of where most of these folks are coming from that use the area?

Johnson: A lot of them up in Badger Two Medicine are coming from west of the mountains, over around Kalispell over there because they claim there's no place for them to ride over there. This is the only place they can ride.

Brooks: What about hunting pressure on it? I noticed that there's far less...

Johnson: Definitely, especially in the early bugle season, there's guys that will unload their four-wheelers at Summit and go plumb up past Badger Cabin and cover fifty miles in one day and stop and bugle and go a little farther and bugle. Yeah, they're a bad thing for hunting.

Brooks: Bad in what way?

Johnson: Because the elk can't stand the pressure of these four-wheelers all the time in there.

Brooks: You know, one other thing I've heard a lot about in terms of the Badger Two Medicine is its position as a wildlife corridor in general. And generally people were talking about grizzly bears. How are they... I mean, what's your experience with the bears in there and the effect on them and the importance of that issue?

Johnson: Well, there's quite a few bears back there. The four-wheelers, they affect everything. I don't believe snow machines.. I really don't see where the snow machines do that much damage back there. They have a trail. They go up Badger and over the top of the Continental Divide and come down on the west side. As long as they stay on that trail, I don't have a problem with snow machines, but I certainly have a problem with four-wheelers.

Brooks: So you mentioned before you said something about seeing a lot more weeds associated with four-wheelers.

Johnson: Absolutely. There's lots of knapweed. Whenever I see them, I get off my horse and I pull them, but a lot of the roots are too deep to pull. But you can sure see a lot of knapweed right on the four-wheeler tracks, especially when they get off the trail and they go through the high grass like up around Red Poach(?) or up above Badger Cabin there's knapweeds starting in there. We have to pack weed-free hay and weed-free pellets in for our horses, so we don't spread weeds. Yet they don't do anything for a four-wheeler. A lot of farmers own four-wheelers and they go through the knapweed and they come in there and they spread it.

Brooks: Are they causing more permanent roads to be cut through there?

Johnson: Absolutely.

Brooks: How many permanent roads are there, and supposed to be in terms of legally developed...?

Johnson: Well, there's one main road and that's what they were supposed to stay on. And there's even signs in there to stay on them. They go right around the signs. And the Forest Service, they can't really enforce it that much because they don't have the money and the manpower to enforce it, so I believe they just gotta stop them completely and that's the only way they can enforce it.

Brooks: So tell me about your trip to Washington, D.C. on the issue of the Badger Two Medicine.

Johnson: Yeah, there's four of us went: myself, Karl Raepple(?), Candy ZioN(?), and Chuck Bix(?) was an outfitter from Choteau. Karl Raepple owns the only ranch that borders the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. And Candy Zion was our leader that took us back there. We spent three days back there talking to our Congressman and the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. We was the ones that originally started the.. .went back there to get this thing moving. Since then, there's been other people went to Washington. A lot of good people go back there and we're getting a lot done.

Brooks: So what would you ultimately like to see happen for the Badger Two Medicine?

Johnson: I'd like to see all the four-wheelers stopped from there because there will be nothing for the future generations to enjoy at all if they keep those four-wheelers coming. Every year, they do more and more and more damage and there would be nothing to enjoy anymore.

Brooks: So you're talking about making it wilderness, where no motorized vehicles...?

Johnson: I would like to see it a wilderness, but there's a lot of opposition to that. I would like to see the four-wheelers stopped would be the main thing. And the oil and gas exploration stopped.

Brooks: Do you have an idea how the tribe feels about that possibility of wilderness, or at least stopping motorized vehicles.

Johnson: Absolutely. They're absolutely for it, 100% for stopping the.. I mean, this coalition I work with is, but I know there's a lot of tribal members use four-wheelers, and I imagine they're opposed to it. But they're only in there, most of them people, for hunting season. They're not in there hammering it all summer long. I say it's gotta be all or nothing. You can't give them an inch because they just take too much.

Brooks: What do you think the likelihood of that happening is?

Johnson: Oh I think eventually we'll get the.. I'm really sure we'll get the four-wheelers stopped, and the oil drilling.

Brooks: What makes you optimistic about it, just more people being aware of it?

Johnson: Yeah, more people aware of it. Like the four-wheelers got so strong so fast and they started destroying so quick before anybody could get a handle on it. And I'm sure they'll eventually get them stopped.

Brooks: You said that you first starting seeing them in there in, what, the 70s? Is that right?

Johnson: I can't really.. Late '70s, '80s.

Brooks: When was the first opposition to them starting, and who was it? I mean, you sound like you've been against it from the first one you ever seen in there.

Johnson: Yeah, there was people ahead of me that was opposed to it. Lou Bruno from East Glacier, he was opposed to it long time before I was. We just didn't think it would do this much damage.

Brooks: You say that the winter use is not nearly as bad, snow mobiles.

Johnson: No. There's opposition to snow machines, but I can't really see... As long as they stay on the trail. There used to be, in the early days when snow machines were first invented, there was quite a bit of poaching went on back there in the winter. But I don't know of any or very much poaching ever goes on with a snow machine anymore. They're family oriented. They have a good time. I don't ever want to see them in a wilderness area, but I have no problem with them going back there.

Brooks: So again it's an issues of just staying on the designated road and that loop that they do that you described.

Johnson: Yeah, as long as they stay on that loop, there's not a problem with it.

Brooks: Who was doing the poaching, any idea?

Johnson: I have an idea, but that was a long time ago. Not many guys poach.

Brooks: Yeah, I mean I don't expect you to name me who was doing it, but was it people from around here or people coming in from outside?

Johnson: No, they was locals, yeah.

Brooks: Great.

