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Oral History Number: 099-005
Interviewee: Larry “Slim” Coomber
Interviewer: Edd Nentwig
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Edd Nentwig: Today we’re in the home of Larry and Mable Coomber in Columbus, Montana. We’ll start the interview with—I’d like to know where you were born, and what year. Were you born in Montana?

Larry Coomber: Yes, I was born in 1907, May the 28th.

EN: May 28th, 1907. Which town?

LC: Billings.

EN: In Billings, Montana? Are your folks from Montana originally?

LC: My dad was one of the ’79 cowpunchers.

EN: Came to Montana in ’79 [1879]?

LC: No, he worked for the old ’79 outfit when it was out here. He was one of the old ’79. He rode with Charlie Russell [Charles M. Russell].

EN: What was your folks’ occupation when you were born?

LC: Farmers. They were dry land farmers. They farmed west of Billings. (Unintelligible).

EN: Your early life then was on a farm?

LC: Yes.

EN: What time in your life did you start trapping?

LC: Well, my dad died in ’29 [1929]. I had trapped a little bit before that, but when he died in ’29, I started trapping. I couldn’t get a job. I had a mother to look after, and a kid brother. So I started trapping, and then I got in with a French Canadian. He took me out a few times, taught me a few things, and I finally got on trapping with him for the government. At that time, the government hired the trappers. Everybody wanted to get on trapping because it was in the Depression and nobody could make any money. Every month, he fired the low man and he hired a new one. When you trapped a coyote, you skinned it, and the government took the pelt and they sold it. You didn’t get any; you were on the points system and you were paid by the month. Well, we trapped north of Billings. We’d come in once a month. We got paid and we would go down to the barbershop there. We hadn’t had a bath in a month. There was no place

to take a bath. We slept in a little root cellar that the homesteaders had left, that there was, and this is what we stayed in. When we got to town and went down to the barbershop, we got our hair cut, got shaved, and put on all clean clothes, and shined up. Got a little bay rum on and we thought we smelled pretty good then, so we went up to the show. We'd get in there and sit down. As soon as it warmed up a bit, everybody would get up and start moving away from us. They'd go sit beside the flowers that (unintelligible); they smelled a little bit better than we did. (Laughs).

EN: The old trappers had a little smell?

LC: You couldn't help it. You couldn't come in and get a shower to get all this smell off of you. We couldn't smell it because we were used to it. One time when we came in, Bateman told us. He said, "You know, I often wondered how come you fellows caught so many coyotes, and now," he says, "I know. I can smell you when you get to the door before you start in." He said, "You smell just like the coyotes so they can't tell the difference. That's the reason you catch so many of them."

EN: Bateman was your boss at this time?

LC: Bateman was the head of the predatory animal department.

EN: What was his first name?

LC: Bob Bateman.

EN: Bob Bateman.

LC: He was an excellent trapper. He was a big fellow, barrel chested, and he wore a Stetson hat. He sent back east, and he bought a wire haired terrier, a registered dog. He brought it out to me and told me to train it for a digging dog. I didn't have to train it. The fact is, I learned from the dog. He just took to it naturally. I did play a little bit with him, but—Bateman came out one spring, and I said, "Bate, I know where there's a coyote den. Would you like to take your little dog out and we'll try him?" We went out, and the coyote den was in a badger hole. I put this little dog down. Well, Bateman got down on his hands and knees and stuck his nose down in the hole. It was the darndest racket in there you ever heard. Pretty soon out came the old coyote; she was in there. She bailed him over—he lost his hat—and pretty soon the little dog came out. He had one of them coyote pups—weighed less than a pound, they were little fellows. He came out and he handed that to Bateman. He went back in and came out till he brought out 11 coyote pups. That's the most I've ever got out of one den. After that, I could do most anything I wanted. Bateman carried that dog in the pickup with him. He took it to the office with him. Every place he went, he took that little dog with him. That dog was just a natural. It wasn't anything that I had done. The little dog just learned it that quick.

EN: When you were getting the pups out of the den, this was in the springtime right?

LC: This was in the springtime.

EN: Was this one of your—as predator control—was this one of your methods?

LC: This is right. In the summertime, they denned them and then you skinned the pup. You killed the pups and cut their scalp off. You took their scalp off. You worked on the points system. You were supposed to average out 15 points a month. So, if you got some points ahead, it helped you later on when snow was bad and you didn't get so many.

EN: What did it take to acquire a point? So many coyotes?

LC: One coyote and one bobcat. We didn't have fox and we didn't have coon. This is strictly what we trapped. It was coyote and bobcat, that's all we would trap. They worked about everything on the coyote. I have a soft spot in my heart for the coyote, in several ways, because it was about the only way a kid could make any money was catching these coyotes. The ranchers wanted to get rid of them. We had quite a few sheep men here at the time. They wanted to eliminate. They didn't just want to get them down, they wanted to eliminate them. It was along about this time that the Fish and Game Commission started hiring these biologists and sending them to school. At that time, a game warden didn't have to go in and take college or anything. They just hired anybody for a game warden.

EN: Is this in the late '30s?

LC: Yes, this was in the early '30s, the late '20s. And they—the first biologists came out and he told us, "I figured out how to get rid of the coyotes, and we'll eliminate them all." He said, "When you fellows catch a coyote by the foot, don't kill him." He brought out some cages, and he said, "I want them put in these cages." Well, we got three or four of them, and the other trappers were doing the same thing. They come out and they gather these cages, and he injected mange into them. He said, "I'm going to make them lose their hair, and when winter comes I'm going to freeze them all to death. By god," he said, "We're going to settle this once and for all; we are going to get rid of them." So they injected them, and they turned them loose, and I guess it worked pretty good. Because the next summer, the state hired all of us to round up all the cattle and horses and everything there was in the state and put them in different baths to get the mange off of them. They got the mange from the coyotes.

EN: (Laughs) Is that right?

LC: This I enjoyed, rounding them up. We rounded up everybody's horses, whoever it was, and we put them through these different baths to get the mange off of them. I don't think that they're ever going to eliminate this coyote. I think when the last man dies, there's going to be a coyote there to howl over his grave, because they learn faster than people do. It doesn't take very long. It's like when these helicopters got after them, it didn't take these coyotes very long to get to the timber. And they don't come out. They go to the timber and they come out to feed and they get back in. It wasn't quite so bad when they used airplanes to hunt them. Try to kill them. But when they got these helicopters, these coyotes got educated quick and they all took to the timber.

EN: That's one of their meanest characteristics, don't you think, is their ability to adapt?

LC: Oh yes. They learn to live with people. They're not like the wolf. The wolf disappeared. They went up in the mountains and they hunted the last ones down, but not the coyotes. Now, down in Los Angeles, we have coyotes right in the city limits. They even attack the babies there in the yard, you have to watch them. They kill all the cats and dogs that they can get ahold of. Coyotes are pretty smooth. I've raised them. I've laid on my stomach and watched coyote pups play by the hour.

EN: Out in the field?

LC: Out in the hills, that's right. I've laid up there. I didn't have the field glasses. We had what they call a telescope. It was a long thing strung out there about two feet long—one hole—and you sit there and you could watch them. You could bring them up close. You could see how they played, roughed and tumbled just like little pups. I've dug them out and I've raised them. I raised a bunch one time, and I had them in a pen feeding them. I intended to skin them when their pelts got good in the fall, but someone come along when I wasn't home and let them out.

EN: Is that right?

LC: We had chickens there. Them little fellows could stay out there in the brush, and hide and sleep, and grab a chicken and run before you see them. It didn't take long till they got all the chickens, and that was the hardest bunch of coyotes to trap that I have ever seen. They were educated. They weren't afraid of you. They'd duck right down behind a bush and you'd go by within three feet of them and they wouldn't move. So they were awful hard coyotes to trap.

EN: Did you work for Bateman very long?

LC: No, I only worked a few years there and then I went to California. I took mother out there to build a poultry ranch. I got her started in the poultry, and then I went to hunting with Jay Bruce, the state lion hunter. He was one of the greatest lion hunters. I learned many things from him.

EN: What town was that? You were telling me earlier about—

LC: Hayward, California.

EN: Hayward, California.

LC: I lived right beside Max and Buddy Baer. When Max Baer was champion, prize fighting. I used to do road work with him. I used to go into Oakland with him at Duffy's Gym. The Japanese came along instructing Judo, and I took a course in Judo. I lived beside him actually there. But Jay Bruce, the state lion hunter, lived just out of Hayward a ways, and he bought gas at the service station I was working at. He talked me into going lion hunting with him. We went up lion hunting, and he'd run these lions down with dogs. They were crummy looking dogs. I asked him, I said, "How do you train your dogs?"

He said, "I don't train them. The lions do." He said, "One mistake, I need another dog". But his dogs really worked. He went up to the trees and he roped these lions. He sold them to the zoo. They have live oak trees and these lions went up them. I was 26 years-old and a pretty husky

fellow. I thought I was just about tops. Jay Bruce, at that time, was 52 years-old and he about run the legs off of me. I just had trouble keeping up with him. He was one of the best hunters. He shot the mountain lions, the ones he killed, with a 22 pistol. Me, I'd of wanted something much larger than that, I think, to kill them because they had some awfully large lions out there. I finally got the book that he wrote after he passed away, but—a mountain lion kills a deer. Now in California we have a deer, something like a mule deer only it's a black-tail deer. They'll kill one every week. It takes a fresh one every week, and when they get a litter of kittens, it takes quite a few of them. So when you get a lot of lions out there, it didn't take them long to go through the deer population and cut it down. This is what they hired him, was to go all over the state if they got to killing livestock. They had to go get them and eliminate them just like we do a coyote here. He took around 1,600 lions.

EN: Wow.

LC: He furnished most of the lions for the zoos.

EN: How long of a period was it that he took 1,600?

LC: He spent his whole life at it. He was raised out there. He got at it in the '20s, I think, hunting mountain lions. He just passed away here in '79, I think it was. He spent his whole life chasing mountain lions.

EN: This was on predator control, mostly?

LC: This was on predator control. He was hired by the state and he got paid by the state. In my opinion, he was one of the greatest lion hunters there ever was.

EN: Did you spend much—how many years approximately did you spend with Mr. Bruce?

LC: Just one year.

EN: One year?

LC: I just stopped over one year. We were up around Placerville, and all over California. He traveled all over the state to chase them. It was quite an education.

EN: Where did you go from California?

LC: From California, I came back here and went to ranching again. When the war broke out, I put in four years in the military police. When the war was over, I came back and I ranched over in (unintelligible) Montana. I still had mother to take care of. Then, she got multiple sclerosis. When I came back from the service, I had to report back into Billings to the draft board here, and they couldn't put me back in—I had a dairy. I had the O'Donnell ranch at Huntley [Montana] that Dublin's (?) now has. They couldn't put me back in the dairy business, so I went to work for Pacific Fruit. I worked for them until I retired out of there, and then I came up here and I went trapping again.

EN: What year did you retire from the fruit company?

LC: Seventy-two.

EN: You were 72?

LC: No, 65. I stayed on until I was 65.

EN: So you kind of stopped trapping until you moved up here to Columbus?

LC: That's right. No, I trapped down in Billings for one year before I came up here—two years down there. Then I moved up here and I kept on trapping. I still go out and trap a little.

EN: You said fox is one of your favorites, huh?

LC: I'd rather trap fox than anything in the world. They are the most fascinating animal there is. But, you know, we didn't have coon. Coon is a fascinating animal. They amaze me. They have them up at sea level—or they have them down at sea level, and they're crawling up the mountain. The altitude doesn't affect them. A coon will eat anything that don't eat him first. Now, they get fat on grasshoppers, and I've taken them up in the dry land hills, where all they get to eat up there is grass seed. They'll eat grass seed, they'll eat wheat, and they'll eat just about anything. Now a full grown coon can go into a knothole in a tree that's three inches. They cause a lot of destruction along the Yellowstone River where we have feeding cattle, the silage corn.

I got a call from the Fish and Game Commission one time to go down to Worden [Montana]. A fellow had a dairy down there and his milk production had dropped. They weren't doing any good, so he went out one night and he thought he'd give them another load of silage. He brought another load of silage to them just as it was getting dark. He came back to the house and looked out and the cows weren't eating. There wasn't a cow eating. So he went out with a flashlight and he found out that his whole trough was full of coon. The coon was eating the corn out and then they'd let the cows come in and eat the shucks. So he called the Fish and Game Commission at Billings. They called me about 11 o'clock at night, and I told them I'd be down the next morning. I went down and there was just coon all over that place. I had a lot of fun catching coon. I made my own scent. I took peanut butter and honey and mixed a little anise oil in. A coon is awful easy to catch, but awful hard to hold. They'll pull out of the trap. They belong to the bear family. There were a lot of automobile tires laying along the river, so I went down and I put a spoonful of this honey inside that old automobile casing. I set the trap inside and wired it to the casing. That way, the cattle couldn't get in the trap, but the coon got inside that tire and then they'd reach into the casing after that. I went down the next morning and that automobile casing was just moving all over the riverbank down there. They couldn't climb the tree and they couldn't break the hold. I had the automobile tires pretty well gathered up when I got done picking up coon. I took about 25 coon. That boy's milk production came right back up again.

EW: I'll be damned.

LC: Then they got distemper after that and a lot of them died off. Coon is not hard to skin, but it takes an awful lot of fleshing to produce a good skin.

EN: They have a real fatty, greasy—

LC: They're fatty and they're hard to flesh. I have fleshing tool over there. I'll show it to you. I made it out of a cottonwood limb.

EN: I saw it there.

LC: Did you? Anyway, this is what I flesh them on. I had a lot of experience helping the Fish and Game Commission. With the problems they had, they got to where they'd call me, because they know I like wildlife.

EN: Was this after you moved to Columbus?

LC: Yes. I helped them down there before I came up and they still call me from Billings. My place is one place where all game wardens are welcome. Sometimes Mable feeds three or four here at once. All going through, they all stop here. I have taken several of the game wardens out and taught them to trap. The Fish and Game want them to know how to trap. They don't want them out trapping, but they want them to know how. This is part of their education. I always feel I've done a little bit of good, when I take one out and he learns to trap. Now, some people take to trapping just like a duck to water and other people don't. Trapping is hard work and most people won't do the amount of work they have to do to be able to catch them. It's awful hard to explain to people the nose that a fox and coyote has on them. A little fox lives mostly on mice, and he can smell a mouse under six inches of snow 100 feet away. So if you're smoking cigarettes or anything, you're not going to get near that fox, or he's not going to come near that trap, because he can smell it. He's not dumb, he's not going to go put his foot in that trap. As long as these young kids are out starting to learn to trap, if they don't learn before they go out there—their education—a lot of these animals, so they're going to be hard to catch.

EN: Like those coyotes of yours.

LC: This is true. They learn quick. If they ever get the law passed where these young fellows have to take a course—same as they do before they go hunting—to go trapping, once they've taken this course and they know what to do, they're going to start catching furs in place of educating them. It's cruel when catch them and you set a trap that's too large and break a leg on them, and they get away. They run around three-legged then. They have a hard time, especially a coyote, making a living. This is when they turn on to the sheep and different things, and eat them. Now, if you think a coyote don't kill deer, you better listen to some of these guys that've watched it.

I went one year and got some deer hides to make a coat out of. We went down and got them. They didn't want me to drag them. They said, "Don't drag a hide if you're going to have a coat made out of it." So we went down and we asked an old bachelor if we could go on his place and shoot some big bucks; we could see them out there.

He said, "Well, being as how you asked me," he said, "I will let you on, but don't shoot the coyotes."

I said, "All right, we won't." So we went out, we got a couple of deer, and we came back and showed him the deer we got. I said, "Now, would you mind telling me why you don't want us shooting the coyotes."

He said, "Yes. They make good mothers out of those cows. Those old cows get used to running that coyote away and it makes good mothers out of them." But that winter, he wrote me a letter, and he said, "If you come down next year hunting," he said, "bring that flat shooting rifles." He said, "I went out last fall to check the cattle on horseback. I got three miles from the house, and here was a little deer that they'd hamstrung. They'd made a meal out of his hindquarter, but he wasn't dead. I had to ride back three miles, get a rifle, go back out, and kill him." And he said, "It made me kind of sick. I think we better to cut the coyotes down." This is—some people have to learn it the hard way. When they get too thick, you have to control them. I like the coyote and I wouldn't eliminate them, but we have to cut them down, just the same as the deer. I don't think there's anybody that raises more wildlife than I do, or protects them more than I do.

EN: I notice you always like to—we were looking at your pictures earlier—you were telling me how you like kids to come out and teach kids. Have you always done that?

LC: Well, I teach—the county agent asked me to teach the 4H kids. I do this every year for him. The kids pay attention to you when they're at this age. I explain to them why we have to trap and why you're protecting the animals when you do trap. Because if you don't, they get diseases, and if you ever seen deer starve to death—I have. If you've ever seen coon with the mange or the rabies, then you see how it affects them and how long it takes them to die. They suffer a long time before they die in the wintertime. But after you find out how they die, then you feel better about trapping them and keeping them down so they don't get so thick and don't get diseases. People that think trapping is cruel—if it's done in the right way, I'm sure it would change their mind.

EN: How did you first start learning how to take care of your fur? I notice you do take beautiful care of your fur.

LC: I learned that years ago.

EN: Who taught you?

LC: This French Canadian. Now, if you go catch a fox—I don't shoot him. If he's in a trap and he can't get away from me. So I take a little shovel I have, I tap him on the nose. This just stuns him. This doesn't kill him, this just stuns him. Then I put my foot on his neck. Then I put my other foot right behind his shoulder on his heart, and stomp down with that foot right quick. This ruptures the heart and kills the fox instantly, and there's no blood on the fur. When you take him out of the trap, he's got 1,000 fleas to the square inch on him. As soon as he starts cooling, they immediately start jumping off. So I put him in a plastic bag and I squirt flea

powder in there and seal it up. By the time you get home, the fleas are dead on him. Then you take him out and hang him up. Then you got to take the cockleburs out of him. If there's a cocklebur within 20 miles of where he was, he gets in it, and they're all tangled up. You got to stop and pull all of these cockleburs out of him. Then you curry him the same as you do a saddle horse. You know a saddle horse that people use that's curried, it has a gloss and shine to his fur? You've got to do this before you skin the fox, while it's still on him. I take a regular curry comb to brush, same as you use on a horse, and I brush this fur till it's perfectly clean before I skin him. This brings the iron out into the fur and gives it a gloss. When you go to sell them, the fur buyer takes a look at that, he wants that fur. Most of the fellows that catch one only get half the price for it because they ruin it in the skinning or not taking care of the fur properly.

EN: What was the old Frenchman man's name that taught you?

LC: Ray Catherine (?).

EN: Ray Catherine?

LC: He was French Canadian.

EN: Was he from the Billings area?

LC: He was at that time, yes.

EN: How did you get hooked up with him? How did you meet him?

LC: He came out to my place for trapping years ago.

EN: Oh he did?

LC: I've known him for years.

EN: Struck up a friendship with him then?

LC: Oh yes. He was a—he only had one bad habit. When we would go to town to get paid, he liked to drink a little bit. One time we went to Billings and got paid. He said, "You go on out. I'll be out tomorrow. You go out and set up the traps, and I'll bring the groceries when I come." I got out to set the traps. He came out the next day, he had a jug of whiskey and a case of white hominy. That was our month's supply of groceries.

EN: (Laughs) Seems a little skimpy for a month.

LC: One time we stopped at Thirty Mile Station. This was in the Prohibition days, when we were trapping. There was a guy up there making a little homebrew. Well, when Ray would get to drinking a little, he got a little ornery. We decided to leave and go home, and we had about three miles to ride back to camp. He was a slow rider. I was always breaking a few horses to make a couple extra dollars. He couldn't keep up with me, so I left him and I went on home, and went to bed. Got up the next morning, here was the old black mare he was riding standing there with the saddle on, but he hadn't showed up. Well, I thought, My god the old fellow's fell

off and frozen to death. So I jumped up, saddled my horse and took the little black mare, and I started back to Thirty Mile hunting for him. I got all the way back, I didn't find him. So I went in and asked them. I said, "My god have you seen anything of Ray Catherine he never got to camp.

They said, "Yes, he fell off the horse and he came back, got ornery, and we locked him in the ice house. If you want him, go take him out of the ice house." He looked pretty cold in there. It sobered him up.

EN: Where was the thirty mile camp at?

LC: Thirty Miles is just straight north of Billings on that highway. It was an old stage stop. It's still there.

EN: Oh is it? What's the name of it now?

LC: Thirty Mile Station. It's still called Thirty Mile Station. It's on that highway there.

EN: Am I holding up your dinner plans, Mable?

Mable Coomber: Not a bit. Not a bit. You'll just eat a sandwich when you get done.

EN: (Laughs) We can take a break. I'll pause the tape here. You can get a bite if you want.

LC: Okay.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

EN: When we were having dinner, you made the comment that this generation that we're in today has a lot of problems. I just kind of—I would like to get that on the interview. A reflection from the past into today and how you think people's morals have changed and if you think any aspect of trapping—have trappers changed, do you think? From back when you started until today?

LC: Yes, I really think so. I think that most of the fellows trapping nowadays are greedy. They don't trap because they like wildlife. They don't trap because they like wildlife. They do it for money, and there's a difference. They're not doing it to hold the animals in check or to correct diseases. They're doing it just for greed. This is the reason they don't get permission off of nobody to trap. They just run through—and they trap too early. They start in before the furs are prime. They just run through and get what they can before the other guy gets it. They don't have—they're not the same class of people that come in. The old trappers were poor people, but everybody was poor, and they never stole anything. They didn't steal a trap. Now, they watch and they steal every trap they can get a hold of.

EN: You think ethics and morals have really declined?

LC: I think they have. People are lazier than they used to be. Now they want to drive everywhere. If they're going to trap, they run over somebody's land with a four wheel drive and tear it up, and then they get to where they don't want anybody to trap on it. The people are too lazy to walk. I think trapping is just about one of the most healthful things there is. I can't think of anybody that likes wildlife that would have more fun if they took their vacation in the fall of the year and went hunting and trapping, and got permission from the man beforehand. Go up and spend two or three week or a month just hunting and trapping. They would have the fun of trapping, they would control the wildlife, and the ranger would be pleased to have them come back the next year. They would be welcome. I think this is where they make a mistake. Then they would have their vacation, and they would make a little money while they were on it, and have some fun. They would have a paid vacation.

EN: About what year did you and your wife become married?

LC: Thirty-four.

EN: Nineteen thirty-four?

LC: Nineteen thirty-four.

EN: How does she feel about you trapping? She help you out?

LC: She loves wildlife the same as I do and she traps. She carries a trapper's license and she can skin animals just as well as I can.

EN: You teach her how to trap?

LC: Yes.

EN: That's pretty good, you have a team then.

LC: That's right. She's been at it for 47 years.

EN: You said earlier you got two boys, but neither one of them is real interested in trapping.

LC: No, they're both electronic technicians. They make more money accidentally than a trapper does on purpose.

EN: But your grandson is interested in trapping.

LC: My grandson takes to it. I would look back to the Kentucky hillbilly Irish back there and my grandson takes right after it. I had a great uncle and all he did was hunt wolves. He was a wolfer-man.

EN: In Kentucky?

LC: In Kentucky. He walked every place he went with his hounds. My grandson, he'll go out and he'll walk all day long. He lives in town and he had to go to school, so he called his dad up one night and he wanted to know if he could take his 22 and go hunting. His dad said, "No, you can't touch the twenty two if I'm not with you."

"Well," he says, "Can I take my bow and arrow?" He made his bow and arrow.

His dad said, "Yes, but don't go too far." He walked about a mile from his place, him and another little boy, and he looked over the cliff and there was a red fox. He shot it and he got it.

EN: I'll be danged.

LC: He was pretty excited. He gave the bow and arrow to the other boy and he picked the fox up, got it by the front feet, and pulled it up over his back. He started for home. He looked up and the fox was looking right at him. It wasn't dead (laughs). So he got it on the ground. Him and the other boy hit it on the head with a rock and finally got it killed. When he got home, he called me long distance. He said, "Grandpa, I shot a fox with a bow and arrow. How do I skin it?" We skinned it by remote control on telephone.

EN: I'll be danged.

LC: I think it cost more for the long distance call than he got for the hide because he called me three or four times while he was doing it. The fleas were so thick on him his mother almost had to "de-coat" him to get the fleas off that come off of that fox.

I belong to the National Trappers [Association]. I'm a lifetime member. I'm a charter member of the Montana Trappers Association. I'm also a member of the Audubon Society and the National Rifle Association. I pay dues into all of them. This is all part of our heritage. I think we should preserve it for some of the children that are coming on later or they'll never know what life was

all about—if we don't educate them to it. I think the best time to do it is while they're in the fourth and fifth grade in school.

EN: You think that's the best time?

LC: I think they pay attention more. If you have them interested in wildlife, I think they will protect wildlife, take care of it better, if you start teaching them young. I think or school teachers should be well-screened to see that they're not anti-trap people before they're hired. They have the kid nine months out of the year and we only have him three months. Kids are impressive at that age. That's one reason why I go free of charge and make lectures to the 4-H kids or any place they ask me to. I don't have any trouble keeping their attention.

EN: Have you ever had any trouble with people jumping on your back about trapping or hunting?

LC: Oh yes, I have.

EN: Oh have you?

LC: Oh yes, I have. I got a call one time to go down to Billings. A fellow had a pond down there. He thought the kids were plugging it up, the outlet, so he sat down there one night to catch the kids and he found out the beaver was plugging the outlet. He called the Fish and Game Commission and asked me to come down, and I went down and we set two traps and took this pair of beaver out that had moved in. But the muskrats were eating on the bank he had in that, so he asked us if we would take the muskrats out. I told him yes, I would set the traps but I wouldn't drive down there 45 miles to check them. I would have my grandson check them, if it was alright with the Fish and Game, and they said that was fine.

So I set the traps, two days later my grandson called me, said, "Grandpa, they stole our traps."

I said, "Well, don't think nothing of it, son. Just call the game warden and tell him." All my traps are registered with the Fish and Game Commission. They're all marked.

The next day I got a letter in the mail. It said, "I got your address off a little trap that my dog wore home. If you would like this trap, you come down and pick it up because I would like to see what kind of character would come down in a heavy populated place where kids play, and set traps". So I went down to get it. I couldn't find her place. I went to the Fish and Game, and they looked it up. It was a new house.

I went over, knocked on the door, and I said, "Lady, I'm the character that set the traps in the heavy populated place." I said, "I come down to get my trap." That was just about all I got to say. She laid into me, and she called me everything that she could think of. She wound up by calling me an SOB.

EN: (Laughs) Is that right?

LC: She was a girl about 30 years-old and she had two little kids there—I don't believe they were over five or six years old—and this little dog. I said, "Lady, now that I got a chance to talk, I learned three things from you." I said, "In the first place, you're not a Montanan. You're not a native Montanan, you're from back East." I said, "Another thing, you don't like your kids." I said, "Another thing, you're not educated."

She said, "What makes you think I'm not educated?"

I said, "Because, a person that's educated wouldn't come out and call somebody an SOB. They would just simply say, 'I hope your mother jumps out from under the step and bites you when you get home tonight.'" I said, "That's a much politer way of saying it." (Laughs) I said, "Another thing, I know you don't like your kids because you're letting them play down there by the lake that's so deep we got trout that weigh eighteen pounds in there. That's a deep lake. If they fall in, they're going to drown." And I said, "You don't like that little dog because we got skunks and foxes down there that have the rabies. If they bite that little dog, he's going to bite the kids and you're going to lose them all." I said, "I know you're not a native because here it's against the law to steal traps." I said, "For stealing a trap here, our fine is \$125. The fine for trespassing—your kids and dog and trespassing," I said, "I hope you have enough money to pay all these fines. I drove down here free of charge, on request, and set these traps." I said, "You don't have permission to be down there."

She turned kind of pale. She said, "You know, you're not a half-bad fellow. I think I would like to have a job like you got."

I said, "Lady, you wouldn't like this kind of job because it doesn't pay anything. I do this free of charge because I'm a Montana sportsman 137. I do this to help people out. This is part of our duties." So, it isn't all fun and pleasure. You get a lot of cussing's out.

EN: On the trap line?

LC: On the trap line. You bet you do. Another thing that amazes me, so many people come in here from back East, and they buy a piece of ground on the river. The first beaver that cuts a tree, they come screaming right now, "Come and get the beaver." If they don't like the wildlife, why do they move in on the wildlife? Why don't they stay back from it? I got a call to go to Huntley one time to get some beaver that was cutting trees. They couldn't find where they beaver came out of the river or where it came from. I went down and the fellow had two great big dogs. I went out and checked around, and found out where the beaver was coming up right through the roots of a big cottonwood tree. He had a hole there where he was coming out. So I went and told him that I would take the beaver, but he would have to shut his dogs up. I put in a killer trap and I caught the beaver, killed him instantly.

EN: Three-hundred thirty Conibear [330 Conibear trap]?

LC: Three-hundred thirty Conibear. I took it out, and then I picked it up, and told him he could turn his dogs loose. People don't understand wildlife or they wouldn't get into these predicaments in the first place.

EN: Do you think that's become—the influx of outsiders coming into Montana then, you say they don't live here, haven't grown up here, and they don't understand it?

LC: This is true. We have more and more of them. They're moving out of the east, coming out in this country, and the more of them that come in, the less habitat that this wildlife has. It has to have habitat to live in. Anytime you've got feed—now you take beaver. If you have plenty of feed for beaver, they're going to come upstream. They're going to be there. You don't have to worry about it. It's a renewable resource. You can trap all these beaver out, they'll come right back up the water and be in there again. Most people don't understand.

I went to a dinner one time and there were anti-trappers. I went in and they didn't know I was a trapper. They had a little girl there—a cute little girl, about ten years old—and I was sitting there beside her, and served us the lunch. They served a little baked potato and a piece of meat. The little girl looked at me and she said, "Mister, who puts the wrappers on these potatoes?"

I said, "My dear, nobody. They grow that way. Wasn't you ever on a farm?"

She said, "No."

I said, "Where do you think your T-bone steaks come from?"

She said, "The supermarket."

I said, "Where are you from?"

She said, "New York". Then I went on explaining to her about the wildlife, and her mother discovered that I was a trapper. Then she jumped on to me and told me I was a so-and-so, because I drowned a beaver.

"It's cruel," she said, "the way you catch that beaver and drown them."

I said, "Lady, I never drowned a beaver in my life. You can't drown the beaver. Nature built the beaver so that as soon as he goes underwater, it closes. You cannot drown the beaver. We suffocate them, we don't drown them." I said, "Lady, I don't think you know anything about beaver."

She said, "I do so. They cut trees. They eat trees."

I said, "No, ma'am, they do not eat trees." I said, "They'll cut them down, but they don't eat them." I said, "What they do eat is the inner bark." I said, "Did you ever go in a beaver house and see it?"

She said, "No."

I said, "I have. I went underwater and went up in a beaver house. Every beaver house in the bank has two or three entrances. You go in a beaver house and it's cleaner than your house." I

said, “They cut sticks and they bury them in the water, so they freeze down. This is what they eat in the wintertime.”

EN: They cache it.

LC: It’s a beaver cache. I said, “The beaver can stay underwater for 20 minutes without air. They go under there and they cut off a stick. They take it up into their house, they peel the outside bark, and they make a nest to lay on that’s nice and dry. They eat the inner bark, then they take the peeled stick out, and they put it back in the water. That’s why you see these chewed up sticks going down in the spring of the year.” I said, “Lady, I don’t think you ever knew anything about beaver. You know they eat themselves out of house and home when they get too thick. When they get too thick, they get up and they migrate across the land. When they do, the bobcats and the coyotes kill them. We lose all the beaver.” I said, “When we trap beaver, and keep them in their place—it will only support so many beaver. Now their choice food is quaking aspen. When they eat quaking aspen, they have a larger litter of young ones, and they get bigger, and fatter, and they have a better fur. Their next choice is willows, and so on down.” I said, “When they get poor habitat, they get sick and they die. So we have to keep the beaver population down to where the food supply is and the more people that come in, the less food supply we have for them.” She called the meeting off and they didn’t have the anti-trap meeting.

EN: Oh, is that right?

LC: That’s right.

EN: That was a good stroke for you then. It seems to me—

LC: I feel sometimes like I’ve done some good, when I get up on them. I’m not always right, but when I think I’m right, by god I get up and fight for it. I don’t blame these anti-trap people. I think they’re all right. They’re just misled. Some people talk them in to giving money, to fight this cruelty of trapping beaver and different things. I said, “If they ever get that law passed where you can’t do it,” I said, “you won’t be able to trap a beaver. If he plugs up a culvert that leads to your home and you can’t get there through for the water, you’re going to scream the loudest. You’ll be the first one to holler.” And I said, “If you can’t set a trap to catch a mouse—that’s anti-trapping. You’re going to get up and holler for somebody to come to your rescue.”

EN: How do you feel about people’s comments about—oh, they call a coyote “wily”, or they call him, you know, “outsmart a coyote?” Do you think that’s right terminology or do you think it’s more important just to know the animal to be able to trap him?

LC: No, it’s—you don’t outsmart them. They live by their nose. They aren’t going to step in a trap if they know it’s there. If you want to catch one, you’ve got to be capable of setting a trap with no odor on it, so they don’t know it’s there. Set the right size trap, so you get them by the foot. It does not hurt them. It’s just like tying a string on your finger. The foot goes numb. They don’t break a leg. I’ve never broken a leg on a coyote in my life. I catch it by the paw.

EN: What size traps do you use for coyotes?

LC: Number three. I never use anything larger than the three.

EN: Do you use long springs or coil springs?

LC: I'm using coil springs. I have used the long springs, but I'm using coil springs. They're easier to bury underground and cover. They're faster.

EN: Do you use snares at all?

LC: No. I don't. I've set snares, trying them out for different people. Whenever you skin an animal you caught in a snare, there's a black ring around it where that snare went, and I don't approve of that. When I want a fur, I want the best fur there is. I'm proud of the fur when I get it. I don't want any marks on it.

EN: You said earlier, when we were talking over dinner about you—I think it was—you sold a lot of fur to Pacific. What time period was that that you sold to Pacific [Pacific Hide and Fur Depot]?

LC: 1972, '73. I sold many, many furs to Pacific Hide.

EN: To Bob Young or (unintelligible)?

LC: In Billings, they bought them in Billings.

EN: Who did you sell fur to in the '20s and so forth when you worked for Bateman?

LC: When I worked for Bateman, the state took them. When I was trapping for myself, I sent them to F.C. Taylor [F.C. Taylor Fur Company] in St. Louis, Missouri.

EN: They were quite an established firm at that time.

LC: That was one of the older, reliable firms.

EN: Do you have lot of old cronies from that time who trapped? Is Bateman gone?

LC: Yes, Bateman is gone. He has a son that's still living, but most of the old people are gone. They're not around anymore.

EN: Was his son Miles Bateman or different family?

LC: No, his son is Bob Bateman too, and he was a fireman in Billings for a long time. He had heart trouble and he retired. He's not there anymore.

EN: Oh, I see.

LC: He did run dogs and chase lions for a while, cougar, but I don't think he does that any more. I don't know if he's still alive or not.

EN: How did you—it's kind of interesting when you were younger that you got started in trapping. What kind of got you started in trapping?

LC: Hunger.

EN: Hunger, the first time, huh?

LC: You better believe it. That was the only way I could get any money. We didn't have things quite as fancy as we have now. We lived on beans. We didn't go buy a loaf of bread. By god, we had to bake the bread. We used sourdough. We baked sourdough biscuits, sourdough bread, sourdough hotcakes. This is where we got it. Many times my meal has been a jackrabbit. I prefer cottontails—I still like cottontails—and I don't believe in destroying them, taking them, unless you are going to eat them. I trained my kids are the same way. I've got a boy who just loves to fish. He catches these big lochs. He leaves them in, reaches down, unhooks the hook, and turns them lose in the water. Five or six lochs and some people just scream when he lets it go.

EN: What's a loch?

LC: Loch Leven. A German brown [trout].

EN: A German brown.

LC: When he lets them go they say, "Well, why did you let it go?"

He says, "I didn't want to eat it. Why should I kill it?"

EN: I see, for the sport then.

LC: That's right. He does it for the sport.

N: Do you remember where you came upon your first equipment, your first traps, when you first got started?

LC: Yes. When I first got started, they used to have an auction at Billings. They called it "Bender's Auction Market", and everybody took in what they didn't want and they sold it there. I got a few traps there. I was peddling papers in Billings when I was a little kid. I got around every saloon there was in Billings. Now that I think back on it, it amazes me that bartenders always let me get around and sell papers to them before they run me out. But the law said they had to run me out, so they had to run me out after I sold the papers. I took some of my paper money, and I bought some muskrat traps at the Bender's Auction, and I trapped skunks on the north side of where Billings is when I was a kid. I skinned them and I sold them. We go two bits a piece for a skunk hide. That was pretty good money for me at that time.

EN: After trapping skunks, did you go to trapping muskrats?

LC: Yes, I trapped muskrats, and in World War I trapped some muskrats. I got two and a half a piece for muskrats in World War I.

EN: Oh, why was the price so high, do you remember?

LC: I don't remember. We got two and a half a piece.

EN: That was a lot of money then.

LC: That was a lot of money. It took an awful good coyote to bring \$15 or \$20.

EN: You said you went into the service for four years. Were you in Europe at that time when you were in the service?

LC: No, I went from Billings—I didn't go to Butte—I went direct to Los Angeles. I served in a—they started up a new batch, they called them the military police. For the Normandy landing, we needed to make a lot of military police, because when they took in so many men, they had to train them. They took some of the old service men—our first sergeant was 64 years-old. They made up a group—they gave us all a test—and they made up a group of what they called DMI. It was the military intelligence and the military police. We had to run down all the guys that deserted and run off. We had to bring them back. We trained the military police for the Normandy landing. We took them over to Normandy, and then we brought back a bunch of boys that were in strait jackets. They went nuts when they went overseas. We brought them back in strait jackets, and took them to Salt Hill, California, where they were put to sleep. They were fed through the veins. When they woke up, some of them were released and some of them were still nuts, so they put them back to sleep again.

Then we would take another bunch of MPs [Military Police] back over there. We rode the trains. We pulled town patrol. We did everything. We had to polish our brass and go out representing the United States Army. When we'd come back in, it looked like we'd been drug through a rat hole. Half of the places in Southern California were all about the servicemen, and we had to go in every one of them, and see if there were any servicemen in there. We had a stockade and we had guards posted around it. If anybody made a break, they killed them right there.

EN: Was that a pretty good experience, being in the service, do you feel? Help you in life?

LC: Yes, I think it did. I think it did. I think it done me a lot of good. I didn't care about going in, but after I got out, I was dog-gone glad I did go. I felt I done an awful lot of good because our boys were not trained. The Germans were well-trained, the Japanese were well-trained. The ones that we worked on thought we were awful hard on them, but they're the ones that survived, and they came back and thanked us in the end.

EN: As you're living here now and you're in your retirement—earlier, you were showing me around your place. It looked like you were busier than when you weren't retired.

LC: Well, I learned years ago what happiness was. Happiness is peace of mind and good health. To have peace of mind you must always do what you think is right. To have good health, you got to work. I don't care who you are, you've got to do physical work. The god lord meant for us to sweat. We get a lot of poison out of our system. I don't smoke and I don't drink, and I don't

have an ache or a pain. I feel real good. When I'm working and I come in, I have a good appetite. I could lie down and go to sleep right now, I don't need any pills. I have a good appetite. I come in and eat, and I enjoy life. I know the devil's going to get me, but he's going to be a puffing and a panting when he does.

EN: Well, it's remarkable. I know the first time I met you in Lewistown [Montana] at the State Trappers meeting there, you told me how old you were. I was amazed at how fit you were.

LC: Well, I enjoy going to the trappers' rendezvous because it's not like it used to be. Years ago, when they had it down on Green River, there was a case of who could outdrink or who could outfight the other guy. Now, when the trappers rendezvous, it's a good clean group of fellows. They told us in Lewistown, it was the first time in history they'd ever seen 600 fellows gathered in one building and nobody's smoking or drinking. That was quite a record. You learn a lot of things, and I see a lot of old timers that I knew and that I trapped with 50 years ago. It makes a chance to get together and visit with them. You feel better for coming back, and you still learn something.

EN: So even today you're learning?

LC: Even today I'm learning. There isn't a day going by that I don't learn. I'm very precise in everything I do. I have to have a reason for doing anything. If you're going to do it, do it good. If you're not going to do it good, don't do it at all. It's not worth doing.

EN: You apply that to your fur handling I see.

LC: That's right.

EN: Take a lot of pride in that.

LC: I take a lot of pride in everything I do. If you're going to do it, do it good. Or else don't do it at all.

EN: Well, we're about at the end of the tape again, so we'll close now and then we'll wait a while. If you want to talk some more in the future, in a month or so, we'll get together again.

LC: Sounds like a winner.

EN: Okay. I'll shut the machine off.

[End of Interview]