

Oral History Number: 443-005

Interviewee: Colin Hardy

Interviewer: Clark Grant

Date of Interview: Fall 2013

Project: College of Forestry and Conservation Alumni Oral History Collection

Colin Hardy: I'm Colin Hardy. I'm a College of Forestry and Conservation alum, although when I graduated in 1977 it was still the School of Forestry. I was one of the first degree undergraduates in the Resource Conservation Program.

Clark Grant: Now what characterizes resource conservation, as opposed to forestry or range management?

CH: It was really the feeling of interdisciplinary approach. I was able to take a lot of sociology and psychology and even some logic classes and communications. In addition, to a lot of the core forestry, but not all of them. As I look back 30- or 40-some years later it was actually the ideal degree for me because I ended up managing folks, who needed to know how to do that.

CG: Now where did you end up working?

CH: I ended up in fire research with the Forest Service, so I've been in research and development with the agency for 37 years—38 years. I ended up back in Missoula managing the Fire Research Program at the fire lab.

CG: So you are still working for the Forest Service?

CH: I am, right.

CG: Is retirement on the horizon?

CH: Oh you know, that's the question when you get to be almost 60. It's probably two to five years out depending on my mood, but certainly not sooner than two.

CG: There's still work left to be done?

CH: There sure is. I've got a crew out at the fire lab of about 85 people. We're doing some really new, cutting edge, world-class science and I just don't want to miss out on any of it.

CG: Now when you were an undergraduate here would you have ever anticipated this would be your job?

CH: No. Ironically, in fact it was my dad's job. I've followed in his footsteps, even in the same building. He was an alumni, graduated here in 1939 and it never occurred to me that I was—I certainly wasn't deliberately following in his footsteps, but as things unfolded, there I ended up. He was at the dedication of the fire lab in 1960 and I was at the 50th celebration in 2010, so I'm pretty proud to have that legacy.

CG: Does that give you some clout among your colleagues?

CH: Actually, it does. You know, it sounds trite, but riding on the shoulders of others—I've been able to ride on my dad's shoulders. This week, even at this alumni event, I just go around with pride knowing what an influence he had. He's a distinguished alumni of the School of Forestry—an SAF fellow—so he's got broad shoulders. At least people recognize my name, so they engage in conversation. "Aren't you Mike Hardy's son?" and I'm still Mike Hardy's son.

CG: You don't mind that at all?

CH: No, I'm proud of it.

CG: And you said, what year did he graduate?

CH: Nineteen thirty-nine.

CG: So he's primarily responsible for your interest in all of this I imagine?

CH: I suspect in an indirect way, not in a professional way. I grew up in Missoula and he was a forester, so we were in the woods every weekend. I learned how to chop and saw and orient and use a compass. Lots of backpacking. Even when I was twelve years-old, we'd go on fifty mile backpacks over multiple days. He was proud of being a forester. He was one of those, you'd call sort of, "wore the green underwear" kind of Forest Service guy. So, I learned to respect and appreciate the forest and the resources. I never really thought I'd be in research. I kind of fell in indirectly in that direction, but I knew I'd be working in natural resources somehow.

CG: What is it that drew you to research?

CH: Sorry?

CG: What drew you into research?

CH: I've always been really curious, you know. Curiosity drew me in. My dad was actually in fire research and I liked the kinds of questions that he talked about. But then when I went to graduate school for my master's degree, I realized I might be able to contribute something and started learning more about fire research. I just love fire. You talk about anybody with a career

in fire, you love it or you hate it. It's a pretty quick decision and the challenges now are really exciting. There is so much to learn about fire. We think we know everything, but after 50 years we still got a lot to learn.

CG: What is left to learn?

CH: We actually think that—we have thought for a long time we knew how fire spreads, even from particle to particle. Guess what? We can't close that physics equation yet. We haven't really been able to characterize that, so a lot of folks in my program are back to fundamentals. We're really looking at bench scale experiments to try to solve that fire spread equation from one particle to the next. Fire ecology is enormous. Fire's effects on everything else that anybody in this college studies, you know, it's everywhere it's pervasive.

CG: Is there something that drew you in to civil service? Were you compelled to serve the public in this way?

CH: Not necessarily. Although, again sort of the culture that I grew up with, around mostly other civil servants, as opposed to industrial folks. Actually, I applied and interviewed for a job with Champion as a field forester and was rejected outright. Again, I wasn't a core forester. At that time resource conservation graduates were probably not looked on by industry as well as they ought to be now. I was always in the Boy Scouts and lots of leadership stuff in schools, so it felt right to be in civil service and I'm proud of it.

CG: Are there any notable experiences that you had as an undergraduate that you'd like to document? Maybe a legendary Foresters' Ball?

CH: You know, I'd like to talk about that, but probably off the record. One of my first dates with the woman that I've been married to for almost 38 years was at a Foresters' Ball. We walked out separate exits over an argument, but we prevailed. We prevailed, as have the Foresters' Ball. Really one of my big experiences here was learning about how diverse this discipline of forestry is. I thought you had to pigeon hole yourself in one place. My advisor was Dave Jackson. I was his first advisee and before him Dean Bolle was my advisor until he moved over to Main Hall. Those were big guys. They really influenced me. I really respected what they had to say. They agreed that resource conservation was the way for me to go and I had a lot of faith in them. I think they made the right call for me.

CG: Is there any way you are willing to talk about what the argument was about?

CH: (Laughs) Probably somebody else dancing with her too much.

CG: Went out separate exits. (laughs)

CH: Yes, right.

CG: I'm curious more about your research and what research you've done in previous years.

CH: Personally, I've sort of been involved in three phases of my life in research. Initially, I was involved in smoke emissions and characterizing smoke and creating a lot of the emission factors that the federal agencies use. The impact there was big. Most of the emissions characterization work had been done in the '80s and '90s I got to share in and enjoy that success. Secondly, characterizing historical fire regimes for the whole United States. Those data influenced the first Forest Service cohesive strategy and have today this term called Fire Regime Condition Class. I was the national lead for that project and that's sort of part of the rubric now. I'm really, really proud of that.

Finally, the new research that we are doing at the fire lab. I walked around my building and we have about 85 people and I counted 27 different disciplines in the building. From journalists to micro-biologists to statisticians. You know, we've got such a breadth of folks there, so we can integrate a lot of knowledge all in one place. Our relationship with the University of Montana here is something that I am really proud of. The National Center for Landscape Fire Analysis is a center sort of chartered by the Board of Regents and it's in the College of Forestry. We have this really strong relationship where we share people, we share knowledge, we share training, and professional development. That is all stuff that we are trying to do together and I think we are really successful with it.

CG: Do you have any political aspirations?

CH: No. I do not. You know, my aspiration is to try to work as a service person and not as—it'd be kind of interesting, but I think it's too much of a grind and too thankless and too frustrating. I like to be able to be in a place where I can make immediate differences, not long term ones.

CG: I've asked several people sort of how they conceive of a forest as a whole when they look at it. Considering the line of work that you all are in, I'm sure it's vastly different from my own perception. You know, when I look at a forest, I don't have the knowledge of how it functions on the level that you folks do. So, I'd like you to say a few things, if you could, about how you look at a landscape, how you conceive of a forest.

CH: I've been really thankful to understand in the last few years from a lot of my [unintelligible] and colleagues about the fact that a forest or a rangeland isn't a state or a condition, it's this thing that holds all these processes. Which is really, everything is flowing. We used to talk about desired future conditions or create this state and keep it there. What I really look at is all the processes. Being in fire, of course, the influence that fire has can't be done any other way. I look at the aquatics and water movement and nitrogen and carbon and all this stuff is changing, so it's really flowing. It's really fun to try to look at that dimension. This isn't just a snapshot here, this is a picture of lots of processes flowing and moving around.

CG: I certainly never thought about it like that. I'm wondering to if there is a story about your father you wish to document?

CH: Oh, I'd love to. He passed away a year and a half ago and he bequeathed a couple of gifts. One to the college for a seminar series and one to the historical museum for their Forestry Interpretive Center and one to the Forest Service Museum of History. Last year when I presented those at the Society of American Foresters (SAF) fall barbecue—which this year was just last week—I told all those students a story. My dad got here in 1933 as a Southern California beach boy and he wanted to be in forestry. He showed up here and they put him to work as a crew boss for a CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] crew because he was a forester. Little did they know that he didn't know much about forestry. His second year—after his freshman year—he came back and worked in surveying on a reservoir project in Washington. He sent a postcard home and I have that on the wall. I showed that to the students. He said, "I made it to the camp, I had a good breakfast, I rented a cot last night, and now I have five cents." So literally, that postcard is hung in my family living room ever since. I show that to people and say, "This guy started with five cents and we can all do just about anything here."

So, that's what I aspire to. We planted a western white pine last year that SAF donated out at the historical museum at Fort Missoula to commemorate my dad. I told those students, "Man if you can get from five cents to where he got in your career and they finally plant a tree in your name, that says a lot." I try to motivate students with those stories.

CG: Are there other pieces of advice you might have for students going through the School of Forestry now?

CH: Yes, actually because I was recently a student again. I finished my Ph.D. in my early 50s here, so I was one of those non-traditional students. As I watched students come to class and go and everything, I found myself being kind of critical and I have kids that just finished college. The deal is to show up on time and pay attention because it's a rare, only chance in your life where you can just absorb and learn. Show up on time, pay attention, respect your professors, but challenge them every day. That's what I'll tell them.

CG: I think that's good advice. Simple.

CH: Yes, I hope so.

CG: Any other final thoughts?

CH: Oh no. I just hope—I hope that folks in Missoula and the community in Montana can understand and appreciate this college and know the influence that they have. So, I want the public to know all about this and that's why I've shown up for all the events. I've been invited to serve on the advisory board and I'm going to be doing that now. I want the public and the citizens of Montana to know what a great place this is.

[End of Interview]