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Interviewees: Eugene Polette and Marian Polette

Interviewer: Jane Reed Benson

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Jane Benson: I'm talking today with Mr. Gene Polette, and later we'll be talking with his wife Marian Polette, both of whom were employees of the Ninemile Remount Depot.

Mr. Polette, let's just get started chatting about when you were there and what you were doing, and then we'll go on from there.

Eugene Polette: Well, I was employed at the Ninemile Remount Depot during the summers of 1950 and '51, in a truck driver position. I drove the heavy trucks, Kenworths, in which the mules and, well, namely the pack string, were carried. They carried the mules, horses, all the packers' equipment, and the packer himself. It had a sleeping cab on that would accommodate two people. During the winter months, I was employed at that time at the federal building doing drafting and topography work. So in other words, I more or less worked at the Ninemile area. During the summer, I worked fire seasons only.

JB: Yes, so you saw fire seasons. That's the important thing.

EP: Yes, right. We were on big one down in the Gasquet-Crescent City, California area. We took, I would say a major portion of the mules which were quartered at the fire depot at that time and the packers went to the California area where we were joined by a great number of what they termed "lifers," or people that were in the San Quentin Prison for life, they were up there on fire duty with their guards. They had one guard for ten prisoners. For the most part those prisoners didn't create any problems at all. We had second thoughts about going in there and spending the night up in the timber with them, but we had no problems.

JB: This was near Crescent City? Whereabouts is that?

EP: Yes. Well it's down on the, I guess it would be the southwest side of Grant's Pass. You go down the Smith River more or less.

And Gasquet, the Gasquet area, we were quartered at the Gasquet Ranger Station and they had a huge fire above that area up in the mountains to the southeast.

JB: Okay. This is Northern California though is it?

EP: Yes, right.

JB: Was this the first time they'd ever gone as far as California, do you know?

EP: I believe so, with the pack strings anyway. I believe that the pack strings had gone into Idaho and various sections of Washington, but I don't believe that they had ever gone into California before.

JB: What summer was that?

EP: Summer of '51.

JB: So what did you do on that California trip? What all did you do?

EP: Drove to from the Ninemile Ranger Station to the Gasquet Ranger Station in Gasquet, California and then was on standby during the...I believe it was the better part of two weeks, that we were in the Gasquet-Crescent City area. During that time we would go truck some heavy equipment, heavy trucks that is of all types carrying supplies to and from the fires. Whenever and wherever we were deemed necessary to provide assistance to those people down there. They didn't have enough truck drivers, and our trucks were tied up as long as the stock was down there.

JB: A couple of things occur to me here. This was the days before interstates. How did you get from Missoula to that part of California?

EP: Missoula, Spokane...Pasco, Washington, down the...Columbia River and across...I believe we went south from Umatilla...down through Oregon. Grass Valley, Oregon. We unloaded and watered the stock, at Grass Valley, Oregon. Then we progressed down towards Gasquet over the pass.

JB: About how long a trip was it?

EP: It took us 44 hours.

JB: Straight through? Just about that?

EP: Right.

JB: Who were you driving with? Do you remember?

EP: Don Harrington and the fellow by the name of Giannotti. I can't think of his first name. He presently works in the Missoula area here, I believe, at the fire development at Fort Missoula on 14th Street. I'm not sure. I can't remember what his first name was, but he was a relief driver that they got out of Spokane. He was quartered at Spokane at the time. We picked him in up in the Spokane area and then he drove relief for us between Spokane and Gasquet.

JB: How many truckloads of mules went?

EP: I believe there were three. There was Don Harrington and Dave Pronovost...I can't tell you the names of the rest of them. I don't remember.

JB: That's okay. Was that a summer like this one? You know, was it a bad fire year?

EP: Very similar. Extremely hot and dry and we had quite a bit of dry wind that year. I learned one thing during the time that I was down in the California area. The fires down there burn differently than they do here in Montana in that they have deep turf there. For all practical purposes, the fire crew will think they have the fire out, and the darn thing might pop up two or three days later, maybe a quarter mile away. Meanwhile, it's burned under the ground and then will pop up and flare up.

JB: I saw that in the paper the other day and I didn't believe it.

EP: Is that right?

JB: It's true.

EP: It's really different from what it is here. We don't have that deep turf here.

JB: No, I didn't understand that. Now I know what you mean. What was it like driving a truckload of mules all that distance?

EP: Well, it got pretty tiring before the trip was over. It was a very long trip and we'd find ourselves stopping during the middle of the nights and pouring cold water over the tops of our heads to keep fully awake to where we could stop one of those beasts if we had to. Sometimes you'd see shadows that would appear and jump out on the highway in front of you. It was a very exhausting trip.

JB: Had you ever gone on anything that far before?

EP: No, nor since.

JB: No. [laughs] Wouldn't want to again?

EP: Oh, it was a challenge in a sense, I guess. If a person's in good shape physically and mentally, I'll put it that way. I think a person can withstand things like that but not as steady diet.

JB: [laughs] Did you get paid any overtime?

EP: Oh yes, definitely.

JB: I was wondering about that.

EP: The pay was good on that trip.

JB: [laughs] The reason I ask is because in earlier times there wasn't any overtime out there—

EP: No.

JB: —from what I can understand.

EP: Right.

JB: You know, people worked pretty long hours.

EP: Right. We were paid well on this trip.

JB: Did you have to get put on fire line?

EP: No, no. We strictly drove truck while we were there. It was a good crew, good people to work with, including the prisoners.

JB: Now, I'm curious about how fires were fought in the '50s compared with the earlier—you know, in the use of mules. Was there a base camp set up specifically for mules? Were you around much to watch how they did things?

EP: Yes, I was around and the mules and the pack strings were just a part of firefighting teams at the time, I guess I would say. They were more effective in that they could get to a remote area more quickly and still have...enable the fire crew to work once they got back in there due to the fact that the pack strings would bring in equipment and tools back to the firefighters and food. They sometimes would set up remote cook facilities—what they'd call spike camps—around the perimeter of this large fire. I think we'd probably find that true today even though we have the [unintelligible] airplane, which was...The amount of usage of the airplane at that time was very minimal. They had smokejumpers, however, and there were smokejumpers used on this fire in California. But I think the mules and the pack strings and packers were very effective towards overcoming this huge fire that they had going at that time.

JB: Did they drop equipment in by plane on that fire, do you remember?

EP: No, no. Well, I'm sure that they did. All the equipment was carried in by truck and then some equipment was packed in by the use of these pack strings to the furthest areas from the camp.

JB: Who were the packers that went on that trip that you remember?

EP: I wish I could remember, but I can't. I know that Dave Pronovost went on that one, and I believe George Voigt (?), but I'm not sure.

JB: Anything else about that California fire that you think people ought to know about?

EP: The one thing that was kind of comical, even though it was very expensive for Uncle Sam or we the taxpayers, was a grease monkey on a TD-24 Cat [Caterpillar], which was and still is I guess, one of the biggest Cats built. He was greasing the Cat, and either the operator or the grease monkey had left the Cat's transmission disengaged. In other words, it was in neutral. He was greasing the Cat on the uphill side of it. The Cat took off and went over a 200 foot [unintelligible] rock wall after having traveled about 100 yards. Needless to say, they brought the Cat back on a couple flatbed loads.

JB: [laughs] Oh gee.

EP: [laughs] It was kind of comical to look back at it now, but I think it was kind of painful for one Cat skinner.

JB: Yes, I'm sure it was. [laughs] It could have gone over anybody. That wouldn't have been so fun either.

EP: Yes, right.

JB: Yes, right, right. Any other times that you went on fires there for the Remount Depot? How far did you drive? Where were some of the places you went?

EP: Oh, Big Salmon Mountain, in Idaho. You go up the West Fork of the Bitterroot, of course, and go over the top. Big Salmon Mountain is actually more or less the dividing point between Elk City, Idaho, and Darby, Montana, right up on top. They had a pretty good-sized fire going up there in '51, and we took a couple of pack strings up there. Then we hauled supplies into them. They had other fires going in Northern Washington, up in the Colville area. I believe that was the three fires of any size that I was involved in personally. Then when there weren't fires burning where they needed us out in the trucks, well, we truck driver's backfilled as hay hands and whatever they needed us at up there around the Ninemile Ranger District. We'd haul the hay from the Ninemile area up to the Perma Winter Range and stack it there for use during the winter months, when they'd transport—we would transport all the mules and horses from the Remount area up Ninemile up to the Perma area for the Winter Range.

JB: Did you spend some time over in the Winter Range then?

EP: Very little.

JB: Just hauling hay mostly?

EP: Yes.

JB: Was that on those big trucks, on those Kenworths?

EP: Yes.

JB: Do you have any idea what became of those trucks?

EP: No, I wish I knew.

JB: I do, too.

EP: Those trucks were really some of the best built trucks that I have ever seen, really. I mean, the body work and everything was just meticulous on them. Somebody had put a lot of planning into them, and they did a lot of good design, as far as I'm concerned. Of course, as most Forest Service rigs are, those were maintained very well, too.

JB: Now, by the time you were driving them, they were getting pretty old.

EP: Yes, they were and I'm sorry, but I can't tell you how old those trucks were at the time, but they were in real good condition.

JB: Well, from what I've been able to dig up talking to people and what I've read, I think they must have been built about, well, mid-1930s. I can't say an exact date. It was sometime after Cap Evans took over, '35, '36, '37, along in there I think. So they were pretty old by the time you were driving them.

EP: Right.

JB: How did they drive compared with other trucks, you know, built in the '50s?

EP: Right. Well, I've driven some trucks since then, not all that much, but some. Other than the difference in power steering nowadays over those which didn't have power steering, once you got to moving in other words, they were a real good rig to drive. If you had to turn them, well, practically motionless, it took a man to do it. [laughs]

JB: [laughs] Yes, I imagine. No power brakes? No power steering?

EP: Right.

JB: Right. Do you remember the horsepower rating on them? Do you have any idea what it was?

EP: They had Hall-Scott 270s in them, if I remember right. I'm reasonably sure that's right, 270 horse.

JB: The reason I ask people about that is, see, there are no written records left on this I'm sorry to say.

EP: I see.

JB: A lot of these things have been destroyed, so what people remember is what we're going to have to go on.

EP: I do remember we got between four and seven miles per gallon with them. That seven miles was on level running and not mountainous terrain like we normally ran in.

JB: That sounds pretty awful by today's standards. How was that by those standards then in a [unintelligible]?

EP: Well, considering the amount of weight that you were moving, it wasn't all that bad.

JB: Yes, must have had big gas tanks.

EP: They did. They had what we called "saddle tanks." I think they were 45 gallons, I believe, on each side. So that would have given you 90 gallons.

JB: I bet you needed most of it on a trip, too.

EP: Right, you bet. Especially if you had to go into areas like we spoke of, like Big Salmon Mountain and then come back to civilization to get gas. They were gas, not diesel, so that was more expensive operational-wise.

JB: Who were some of the packers that were around there those two seasons you were working?

EP: Well, there was Charley Harrington, George Voigt (?), Coy Rice [McCoy "Coy" Rice], Benny Bencotter, and I believe, that was about the size of it. There were probably one or two more which I can't remember. Then Dave Doig ran a sign shop out in the Ninemile Ranger Station and

did building maintenance there. He did a lot of good quality painting on the buildings and then again in his sign shop.

JB: Dave Doyd?

EP: Doig. D-o-i-g.

JB: D-o-i-g. Okay.

EP: Mabel Bencina (?) cooked in the kitchen. Her husband, which I can't tell what his actual first name was, but they called him Benny also. He did odd jobs around the area, helped in more or less as bull-cook, and helped his wife. Dave Pronovost, who I spoke of before, went with us to California, [unintelligible] the capacity of a horseshoer out there, and Charley Harrington backed him up. After Dave retired, Charley assumed the full duties of the probably the only horseshoer that the government employed at the time in the nation.

JB: Yes, he probably was. I've heard a lot of stories about him.

EP: Right. Dave Pronovost had been around the Ninemile area, I think I would be right in saying, since the beginning of the Remount. Don Chamberlin [Donald Chamberlin] was the district superintendent, I believe it was...

JB: Superintendent of the remount, I believe, yes.

EP: Okay. At the time I worked up there.

JB: Somebody else would have been the ranger because they were separate facilities.

EP: Okay.

JB: I wonder who the ranger was right then. I probably have it written down some place that I don't remember right now.

EP: I don't remember.

JB: Okay. Was Bob Estes out there at that time as a blacksmith?

EP: No, no. I don't know. No, I don't know him.

JB: Okay. So you knew Don Chamberlin then?

EP: Very well. Don was a fine man.

JB: I imagine your wife worked for him?

EP: Yes, right.

JB: I'll have to ask her about that.

EP: Right. My wife, Marian, worked for, directly for Don as his clerk typist and standard graphic work of all types.

JB: Yes. I believe when we talked the other day on the phone you were talking about when they filmed the movie out there.

EP: Yes.

JB: Were there any mules and trucks in that movie *Red Skies of Montana*?

EP: Oh definitely, yes. Definitely, yes.

JB: Were there?

EP: Yes. We had everything that we had available at the Remount loaded on all the trucks that we had, both large trucks and small trucks, to try and depict what force—I guess, workforce—we had available at the time. It was kind of a showy thing; however, as I mentioned to you the other night, we were the background for the introduction to *Red Skies of Montana*. There's a lot of lettering and everything else over our trucks and so on.

JB: [laughs] Was this a truck full of mules?

EP: Yes, right. We had the entire pack strings on the trucks just as if we were going to a fire somewhere.

JB: Was it only in that introduction to the movie?

EP: Yes.

JB: Was that the only time and then it disappeared?

EP: Yes. [laughs]

JB: I was talking with, maybe you know her, the daughter of Dave Pronovost. She's Mrs. Peyton Monture.

EP: Oh yes, yes.

JB: Now she mentioned something about that same shot that she was in one of those trucks.

EP: Oh, is that right?

JB: Was she in with you?

EP: No, she wasn't in with me.

JB: It must have been somebody else.

EP: One of the packers was riding with me, and I don't remember which one it was now. As I said, we had both the large trucks and the small ton and a half trucks up there and they were loaded to the gunnels.

JB: Now was this out at the Remount Depot or was this someplace else where they shot it?

EP: No, this was right up here on Blue Mountain where we turn to the National Guard and Army Reserve firing range.

JB: Well, it's been a long time since I've seen that movie. Of course, I wasn't looking for that at the time. [laughs]

EP: Same here, right.

JB: Yes, right. Do you remember anything else about the filming of the movie that involved those trucks, or those mules, or anything for that matter?

EP: Nothing other than I definitely remember we went to work early that morning in an effort to try to get everything into the Missoula area here by the time the light got just right for filming. As I remember, we had to be on the premise up there, the site of the filming anyway...

JB: At Blue Mountain now?

EP: Yes. It seemed to me like by about 7:30, if I remember right, and it took a lot of coordination on everyone's part to get all the trucks and everything up there. It seems to me like we set there for some two and a half hours before the light and all the conditions were right. They finally had us make one run through. I don't know whether they got a bad take on it or whether for safety's sake of having to get all these people together again for another run, but they had us run through a second time. So actually, we wouldn't have to have gotten out there early at all. We would have had plenty of time if we would have gone to work at our normal time that morning.

JB: Did you spend the rest of the day out there then?

EP: No, we went back to the Remount as soon as the shooting was over.

JB: So in the film then, there weren't any shots of really mule strings going out on fires or anything like that?

EP: No, no. I was kind of disappointed. I didn't care about myself, but there were some of those old timers such as Coy Rice and Bencotter and some of them that had, you might say, an entire lifetime of Forest Service duty and I would have liked to have seen them given a little splash here and there in the movie, you know, but they didn't even show that.

JB: I suppose they figured, well, this is a film about smokejumpers, you know, the new technology.

EP: Basically it was, I guess.

JB: Yes, right.

EP: I give those people a lot of credit. They're very well-qualified, good people.

JB: This is a good example of the changing times here. You were there at that time that things were changing.

EP: Right.

JB: That's why it's interesting to talk to somebody like you because you saw this transition taking place. I've been told that during some of these later years, the mules were used to haul stuff out from fires. A lot of this equipment had been dropped in by plane...

EP: You're right, 100 percent

JB: And the mules only brought it out?

EP: Yes.

JB: Did you go out on a lot of those kinds of trips?

EP: Pickups, right. We'd go out and drop the mules off and sometimes come back in a couple of days and pick them up. But for the most part, there was a string of mules assigned to a ranger district for the summer months. We'd take the packer and his string of mules to a specific ranger district, drop the string and the packer off, and for the most part, he would be assigned to the ranger in that district. If there was smokejumper activity in that district, they'd take the

string and maybe make two trips with a ton and a half truck. Take him up to an area at the end of a road, you know, where there was fire in progress, drop him off. Then he'd pick up the tools and [unintelligible] the jumpers and bring that equipment back to the road end. There again, he'd be picked up and hauled back to, his string, hauled back to the ranger district where he'd be quartered.

JB: He just stayed there then for the season. Is that what you mean?

EP: For the most part, yes. There was a packer assigned to, well I guess they termed it "strategic locations" throughout Region One. However, there were a certain amount of packers quartered out at the Ninemile—the Remount area. Those were all to fires directly out of the Remount area then.

JB: Yes, I guess this a place where I was starting to get confused here. I hadn't realized that some of them had just been assigned out and stayed there all summer.

EP: Yes, right.

JB: I had visions of them always going back and forth to the Remount.

EP: Coy Rice is one that used to. Usually, we'd see him in the spring and in the fall. We'd take him and his string out in the spring and then pick him up again in the fall.

JB: Yes, you're right about that. I've talked with Coy Rice. He was describing being on blister rust control—

EP: Yes, right.

JB: —someplace overnight. That must have been what he was doing was staying out there for the whole summer working on blister rust.

EP: Right. Then while these packers were out in the ranger...assigned to these ranger districts, if there weren't any fires going and they had a good summer such as, oh, in the past couple summers they had been in the Missoula area, not including this one that's in progress right now. But you term it a good fire season where there aren't too many fires going, well they'd assign these packers to, oh, dissemble lookouts, up to a lookout area piece by piece in other words. Then the Forest Service would assign a crew to assemble the lookouts on the spot. There's many, many lookouts that have been packed in on mules. A lot of people don't realize that something like that could be hauled by way of mule.

JB: I've come to realize that finally because I've had it described to me. But, no, I wouldn't have believed it before. [laughs]

EP: Right.

JB: Mrs. Polette, now that you've joined us, we were talking about a couple of things that you might know something about, like we were talking about the movie. Do you have any specific recollections about filming of that movie?

Marian Polette: You know, I don't, because I think I was in the office itself. I don't think I even got out for the filming of the movie.

JB: Oh, there must have been a lot of hustle and bustle around though, wasn't there?

MP: Yes, everybody was busy, you know. Everything like that. But as far as I'm concerned, in the office itself, it didn't disturb us in the office because we just had to go had to type up all the [unintelligible] stuff as usual.

JB: Things were just normal?

MP: Normal in the office. [laughs]

JB: Since we're talking about that office, maybe you could tell me who you worked directly with and—

MP: Yes, Don Chamberlin was, of course, my boss. He gave me just secretary office stuff to do, like typing and...

JB: How many people like you were in that office at that time?

MP: Only me, under him. When the cook got, you know, slow and needed extra help, then I'd go help her in the kitchen then come back and work in the office. I had a two-time job, you know.

JB: Yes, it sounds like it.

MP: He was a good boss, awfully good.

JB: I've written to Mr. Chamberlin. I haven't heard from him yet, but I hope we will.

MP: Oh, you have?

JB: Perhaps we will. When had he come there? Do you know?

MP: Oh boy, I don't. Do you?

EP: I believe it was '51.

MP: That same year?

EP: I'm quite sure of that.

JB: How long were you there then working in that office?

MP: Only the one term now. I'd say, oh...it's been so long ago now. [laughs] I don't remember, but it was a whole—

EP: I'd say probably from—

MP: —summer.

EP: About April to September, I believe.

MP: Because I know it wasn't during the winter months.

EP: No.

JB: Would this be '51?

EP: Yes.

MP: '51, right. So it wasn't too, too long in there, but...

JB: Was there any other kind of office staff? Anybody else answering telephones or doing anything that around there?

MP: There was one man that helped out a tiny bit. Do you remember who that was? He was sort of heavyset. I don't remember his name, but he wasn't in there too often. If we got an oversupply of different filing, typing, and stuff to do, he'd come on in and help. But I don't remember what his name was or anything. [unintelligible] '51.

JB: Well now, when a fire call came in then, what part did you play in that?

MP: I didn't. All I did was just his regular typing and things like that. Now, he...

JB: Well, did you ever answer the phone for fire calls?

MP: No, he took those [unintelligible].

JB: How would you know if it was that or just somebody calling and asking a question?

MP: Well, things really speeded up. I mean he got people on to us at the time...

JB: I guess what I'm saying is, how would you know—didn't fire calls just come over the telephone just like any other kind of call?

EP: I think they had a dispatcher type person at the time that would answer all calls. I'm reasonably sure.

JB: Well, this is what I'm wondering. Would it be a regular telephone call to notify a fire or was there some special way he knew that the incoming call was a fire?

EP: No, he had no knowledge of that until he was advised that it was a fire.

JB: So you could just as well have answered the phone sometimes and it was a fire call.

EP: Right, right.

MP: Probably so, but I didn't take over answering the phone. That wasn't in my job.

EP: No, they had a dispatcher. I can't think of the...

JB: But he was out there on duty all the time?

EP: The alternate ranger I think is what backfilled as sort of a dispatcher, answered all call...

JB: Oh, I see. Okay, that's what I was wondering.

EP: During the working hours.

JB: You don't know who that would be right off?

MP: Should know it.

JB: Yes. So then actually there would probably be the three of you around there most of the time?

MP: This one man...I don't know if he had other duties. I don't know what he did when we was out of the office. I don't know. [laughs]

JB: That's okay. I'm just trying to get it straight in my head what this looked like on a day when a fire came in. Who would do what?

MP: Right, right. I guess I didn't have anything to do with that. I mean, they just had the typing and that's all I had to do, you know.

JB: When a fire call came in then, what did Mr. Chamberlin do?

MP: He just got other people on to it, but I don't know if he went outside.

EP: Well, they had a switchboard at the Ninemile Ranger Station and of course as any ranger district they have X number of lookouts reporting to this district headquarters by way of telephone. The dispatcher, or whoever was on duty at that time, would take the fire call. Then they would have a fire crew standing by there at the ranger district, what they termed the "hotshot crew" [unintelligible]. Okay, if it was a small fire, what the lookout would have termed "close to a road" then they would dispatch this hotshot crew to it. If it was in a remote area where they couldn't get to it quickly enough by road or whatever, then they'd alert the smokejumpers which were quartered up at Camp...

JB: Menard?

EP: Menard, right. They flew them out of there then. That was before the days of the Aerial Fire Depot.

JB: Yes, that little airstrip down the road there?

EP: Yes, right.

JB: Yes, I've seen that.

EP: So they'd take off, at that time, in Ford Tri-Motors or the old Travel Airs, and they'd drop on the fires then. Then if the fires were of any size at all, well, there would be a good chance there would be a packer and his string, a pack string of course, dispatched to the fire with equipment and/or cook supplies...

JB: Yes, right. Right. I got that part all straight. I'm still trying to get this straight in my head here about how these messages get around, how everybody knows what they're to do. Do you mean then that the call would come in actually to the ranger station rather than the Remount Depot? Are you saying that call would first come to the ranger station?

MP: I think it did.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

JB: Where would that call first actually be received?

EP: Let me clarify one thing. The ranger station and the remount depot were one and the same.

JB: Well, did they operate out of the same office even?

EP: Yes, yes.

JB: I know administratively they were different.

EP: Right, right.

JB: I thought they maybe had separate offices, too.

EP: No, no.

MP: [unintelligible] Don Chamberlin's house itself? Because I remember a bunch of people used to go over there and we, during our coffee breaks and stuff, went over on their lawn. It seemed like they had some kind of something coming out of their house. Circumstances (?), it seems like...

EP: Well, he might have had a radio. I don't know if whether he had a radio that—if he did, he was the only one up there that did, but I doubt very much if he did at that time, even then.

JB: So you're saying that all these staff members worked essentially in the same building all together?

EP: Yes, right.

JB: Were you also a secretary then for the ranger?

EP: I only [unintelligible] Don Chamberlin himself. I don't know who would have taken over there.

JB: I wonder if there was another secretary for the ranger.

EP: It seems to me like Don Chamberlin was the ranger, but I could stand corrected there. I don't know.

JB: I might have all this down someplace. I don't know if I do or not. [laughs] I'm not sure who that would have been. Well, at any rate, it was all closer than I thought it was.

EP: Yes. Camp Menard now, that was exclusively the smokejumpers only up there. There were no smokejumpers down at the Remount Depot only when they were assigned on, oh some cleanup detail or something like that. They were quartered at Camp Menard and were fed up there and all of that.

JB: Do they have barracks up there and everything?

EP: Yes, they did at that time.

JB: That's interesting. I've seen that since it's been turned into a picnic ground.

EP: Right.

JB: Was that picnic ground area still there where it is now?

EP: Yes, but it was very minimal in size. I mean, the barracks—

JB: Where were they?

EP: I believe they were on the right hand side going up, I'm sure, on the right hand side of the picnic area on that flat in the end of that [unintelligible] sort of.

JB: Well there's kind of a little gully that runs all the way up there, too.

EP: Right. They were right at the end of it. I'm reasonably sure. That's been a long time ago now, and I'm sure that all the buildings have been torn down.

JB: Oh yes, they are. They're just not there.

EP: Right.

JB: That's the thing, see. A lot of us are never going to see that, so... [laughs] That's why we're relying on you. Do you have any idea how many barracks buildings they had? Anything like that?

EP: It seems to me like they had three and a cookhouse. All four were about of equal size. They were large in size. They were similar to the old strip houses out there at the university that they had many years ago.

JB: Yes, I've seen those.

EP: Pre-fabricated type things.

JB: Then how did those smokejumpers get from there out to that airfield?

EP: Just by trucks.

JB: Could they go directly across up there, or did they have to come down to the main Ninemile Road I wonder?

EP: No, they had to come down to Ninemile Road, right.

JB: I'm sorry. I'm getting a little off on things you didn't directly work with.

EP: No, no problem. You had me there for a minute because I've hunted up in that area, too. I thought, Is there a cross road or isn't there? No there isn't. You have to come down and then go back up. It formed sort of a V there to the airport.

JB: Okay, okay. Well, when you people both worked out there then, did you live out in that area?

EP: No, we lived in Missoula.

JB: Drove back and forth every day?

EP: Yes.

MP: Back and forth each day. It worked out good with two of us, you know—

JB: Yes, it would.

MP: —going together that way. It paid off, you know? [laughs]

JB: Yes, right. How did you happen to get the job?

MP: I think Gene came home and said they were needing a secretary, and so I applied for it and got it. I don't know. That was only the one summer that they needed somebody, and that's all I wanted to take it to.

JB: Do you mean that they normally didn't have one?

MP: I think they did, but I don't know what happened to the one before.

EP: I don't remember who was the secretary there before you.

MP: Because I said I'd work the one summer and that would be it then and that's all. I don't know who took over after.

JB: I was going to ask who came after you did.

MP: I started work at the University then. I was closer and more pay and everything.

JB: But you don't know who came after you then?

MP: No, I sure don't. I don't know anything about it after I left.

JB: I would expect they would have had one most of the time, but maybe not. I'm not sure how much paperwork...In those days, maybe there wasn't so much paperwork, was there?

MP: There wasn't too much and this is why Mabel in the kitchen was able to call on me because I'd get things caught up and then I'd go in and help her. You know, I'm needed that way, too.

JB: Since you people were there at this particular time, like we were talking a minute ago before you came in about watching the transitions taking place. You know, between the old way and the new technology and all that. You were there, what '51 [unintelligible]? Was there talk then about closing down the Remount Depot?

EP: Yes.

JB: What was being said at the time?

EP: Well, the horses were being sold. Those horses were, as I understood it and I'm really not that much of a horseman, but those horses came from some of the finest stock that ever existed really way back when. They were gradually phasing them out, and some of the older packers who were horsemen from the day they were born, you might say, were really concerned as to whose hands those horses were going to fall into. As I remember, the horses were auctioned.

JB: Yes, other people have described to me these auctions and where some of those horses went. I'd like to know.

EP: For the most part, I believe they kept most of their mules because I wouldn't say for sure, but I think the Forest Service still uses a minimum amount of mules.

JB: Yes, there are still a few around on some of the ranger districts.

EP: Yes, I thought there was because I'd get up in that Ninemile area, I used to work up there a lot for the telephone company. I worked that area on regular. I had occasion to pass through

that area probably once a week or so. I know that there were quite a few mules pastured up there and I know that certainly they wouldn't have kept them unless they had a use for them.

JB: Was it definitely planned do you think that the Remount Depot would end at a certain time or was it a sort of just gradual "I think we don't need to do this much"?

EP: Gradual phasing out, right.

JB: Was that the sort of it?

EP: Because due to mechanization and the time element involved in an airplane dropping smokejumpers on a fire and that which, the time for which it would take a pack string to reach a fire, I believe the handwriting was on the wall that the airplane was going to win out eventually and it did.

JB: Yes, yes. How did Mr. Chamberlin feel about that? Do you have any idea?

MP: I don't remember on that—

EP: I think he was from the old school. He hated to see the transition, really as most of us did.

MP: I know he and his wife were talking about it. That's the only thing that I remembered about it. They were discussing that they'd have to move, and I guess their house was supplied...it was a big, pretty house. It was supplied to them for working out there. They were talking about maybe having to move, you know, if this did come about. This was about the only thing that was said. Don wasn't too much about talking over these things in the office, you know. He had work to do and he concentrated on the work, unless we went to coffee breaks then it was discussed. [unintelligible]

JB: Did you see memos go back and forth about that?

MP: No, no I didn't.

JB: The actual decision was made I believe fiscal year '54. That was the end. I was wondering how long it had been discussed, you know.

MP: I personally didn't see anything in '51.

EP: They had actually started the phasing out of the better horses before, previous to '51. It was—

JB: Yes, late '40s I think was the beginnings of it.

EP: Right, right.

JB: They quit raising mules also in the late '40s. They just relied on what they had left or they would buy some as I've been told. I was about to say as I recall. [laughs]

EP: Well, I would agree with that.

JB: Yes. I was going to ask you, I've been told that there were visitors from the United Nations. Did you ever see any of these people come through?

EP: Yes, oh yes, definitely. There were people from various countries—"foreign foresters" I believe they called them—and there were several groups that visited the Remount area during the two years I was involved up there. The one group I remember was from India. These people were very interesting. One of the most interesting aspects that I remember from their being there was that each of them that visited there spoke English very fluently. I thought we'd probably encounter a language barrier there, but they spoke better English, for the most part, than we did.

JB: It's customary for those people to learn it.

EP: Right, that's what they told us that they had...

JB: Were they there to learn this actual mule operation or the firefighting? What was it that they were being shown?

EP: I believe that it was just that the Remount was one aspect of firefighting, which was kind of unique, and they wanted to get some exposure to this because some of the foreign countries were much further behind in their progression towards firefighting than the United States was at the time. They still had livestock for packing and so on. This was their main, one of their main reasons anyway, for visiting the Remount area to learn packing techniques and firefighting techniques. Tie the two of them together, and try to take back to their own countries some ideas where you could combine the two of them for firefighting usage.

JB: That's interesting. I wonder whatever came of that. I've never thought about it.

EP: I'd be interested to know, too.

JB: I've never thought about that. Yes, I've never thought about that.

EP: They probably had more in mind than that. One of our present neighbors up here, Art Brackebusch, heads up the fire lab out here now. They have visiting foresters from other countries, and of course, the people that visit his fire out there are after an entirely different

thing than those that visited the remount station in the '50s, I'm sure. More advanced techniques, and they determine the burning rate of different materials and so on.

JB: It's really scientific.

EP: More scientific, right.

JB: It would be interesting to find out though if in one of these countries now they might be operating something like the remount depot based on this.

EP: Yes, right.

JB: Some curious person might want to check that out. [laughs] Do you remember any other particular groups that came through?

EP: No, I don't.

JB: As I understand it, in the late '30s especially, the place was always a host to visitors. Was it still like that in the '50s? Were there many visitors?

EP: I wouldn't say a great amount, but there were some. They were made to feel at home up there.

MP: Unlike when the people from...where were they from?

EP: India.

MP: India came through then. The cook...Oh, she was a wonderful cook, and she put on a great big steak feed. She could cook anything. A strawberry chiffon pie, I can remember that so good. It was luscious. These people from India, they couldn't get over her meal she put on with help, you know. There was a big bunch that left a lot of dishes and things to do, but she was a cook. What a cook! She knew how to handle the kitchen. [laughs]

JB: Did local people come out to visit while you were there?

MP: No. They did, except—

EP: Once in a while, they'd come up. The main attraction up there would be in the spring during the smokejumper training.

MP: Oh, yes.

EP: You would always see a group of cars up there at the landing field, watching the smokejumper activity, because they trained—they dropped, I should say—the smokejumpers right on the landing field there itself. They dropped in that pasture area.

JB: Oh, did they?

EP: Right. We used to drive up there after work in the evening and watch them sometimes. It was really fun watching them.

JB: Were there ever any bigwigs, shall we say, from Washington? People like that?

EP: Oh, yes.

MP: Was there?

EP: Sure.

MP: [laughs] See, now that I missed out on, because in that office I lost out on a lot of stuff. I didn't get—

EP: I think it's like any program that's unique in that it might as the Remount, to my knowledge anyway, was the only one of its type in the nation.

JB: Oh, I think so.

EP: Of course, every now and then you'd find some big shot from back east or wherever would want to come out and take a look at it just to see what made it tick I believe.

JB: Were these mainly people in the Forest Service?

EP: Yes, right.

JB: That's what I thought, too. In the early days, an occasional senator would drop around.

EP: We didn't have any of them up there to my knowledge, but there could have been.

JB: Yes, yes. Is there anything else about this operation that you might, either one of you people, might know more so than other people?

EP: Well, just being involved in it for a short time myself, I think I've offered the most that I could. [laughs] One interesting aspect of it that I encountered as did the other truck drivers that weren't on fire details would get the garbage detail once in a while hauling the garbage cans

from the ranger station up to the dump, which was across the road to the southwest from the airstrip. There were always a bunch of...so far as we encountered them, friendly bears—

JB: I was just going to ask if there were any bears over there. [laughs]

EP: —waiting for us to dump the garbage and on some occasions that the bears would get so brave that they'd actually crawl in the back of the pickup. By the time you got a couple cans dumped, they'd be in there feeding off of the remainder of the full cans in the pickup. It got kind of hairy or scary, however you want to put it there, on a couple of occasions. No harm was ever done to anyone up there. The Fish and Game trapped several bears—one right down in the Ninemile Ranger Station backyard. Remember that?

MP: I do remember.

EP: I think two or three, if I remember right, up at the dump area and then transplanted them before they got to be troublemakers. To my knowledge, nobody ever got hurt by them.

JB: That's funny. Nobody's ever mentioned bears before. See what I mean? You know, you know something that nobody else remembers. [laughs]

EP: Don and Charley Harrington could tell you about them, because we used to take turns on the garbage detail up there. We all had some run-ins with those bears.

JB: Were there other animals that came down?

EP: Oh yes, and I'm reasonably sure there are still whitetail deer that will come down there and feed in the Ninemile pastures in the evening. There's elk right up in the...

MP: What kind of bear was that?

EP: Oh, just little brown bears.

JB: Do people keep pets around there? I mean the people that worked there and lived around in the ranger district or at the Remount?

EP: Now do you mean wild animals as pets?

JB: No, no, I was just trying to think—

EP: Dogs?

JB: I'm wondering if mixed up in all these mules and horses if there were dogs and cats. That's what I'm wondering.

EP: Oh yes. Right.

MP: Yes. Don Chamberlin had a dog and several cats, didn't he, at his place?

EP: Right, yes.

JB: I'm trying to get a view of what the place looked like, see.

EP: They never—

MP: They seemed like they had—

EP: —posed any problems really.

MP: —some kind of wild animal food, did they?

EP: I was thinking they had a deer there, but—

MP: I won't say that I know that they did, because it seemed like...

EP: —I think I'm mixing it up with the Bison Range headquarters really.

JB: How did you feel about working out there?

EP: Oh, it was a good job, good people to work for and work with, and I enjoyed every minute I spent out there.

JB: Even though you knew it wasn't going to last forever?

EP: Right. Sometimes I had second thoughts about having quit the Forest Service, but I have a good job with the telephone company now. I guess I have no regrets really. The Forest Service was good to me, and I liked and enjoyed the job and the work very much.

JB: I wonder how people felt about it when they closed it down. Did you get any feelings of—at the time you were there—about how people felt about it?

EP: Oh yes, definitely. There again, those old time packers had had put in a lifetime of packing and working in the out of doors for the Forest Service. Some of it was just seasonal, but they accepted this and it was a way of life with them. But part of their life went along with the abandonment, I guess, of the Remount.

JB: I know a lot of them found other jobs within the Forest Service.

EP: Yes, most of them did.

JB: A few of them, I think, became outfitters, too. I think they went off on their own and continued to pack for people.

EP: Right. George Voigt did that I know for sure.

JB: Did he?

EP: Coy Rice retired. Benscoter retired. Johnny Bencina—Johnny was his first name—retired and he got some retirement from the Forest Service. He was a retired army sergeant when he began working for them.

JB: Had he also been a packer?

EP: No, no, Johnny never did any packing. Benscoter, Coy Rice and some of the old timers, just felt like part of their life left them when they abandoned that Remount area.

JB: Anything else that you'd like to add?

MP: I can't think of anymore.

JB: Well, if you do, you can let me know. So thank you for now.

EP: You're very welcome.

EP: One unique aspect of this remount duty was that Coy Rice, who was one of the older and more experienced packers up there, would only have one person hauling stock, and it wasn't myself. Don Harrington had hauled Coy and his stock for many years or a few years, and this is the way it was. Don was the only one that was going to touch his stock, and this was all well and fine because the two of them got along real well. Another thing that I might throw in here in the last few minutes is that on this Salmon Mountain fire we encountered rattlesnakes up there. At that time, to my knowledge of course, it was my first time in there, I didn't know there were any rattlesnakes in those higher Bitterroot Mountains, but the Selway area is full of rattlers.

JB: I didn't know that either. [laughs]

EP: On that fire, they encountered quite a few snakes—rattlesnakes that is.

JB: Oh heavens. I wonder if they bothered the pack strings any.

EP: No, no they didn't. But those firefighters told of some pretty hairy encounters with the snakes up there. One thing that's unique about a rattlesnake is that when it cools off in the evening, the snakes will crawl up close to the fire to enjoy the warmth of the ashes, you know, and get close to the fire. That's why snakes will crawl out on a paved highway at night because the pavement...

JB: Still warm, yes.

EP: Retains the warmth from the daylight sun.

JB: The reason I ask about pack strings is because I guess they've had had a lot of problems with the hornets, for example, in the woods.

EP: Yes, definitely.

JB: That's mainly the thing. I guess there was never any other real danger. No animals would bother them ever, but the hornets were fierce.

EP: No. I wouldn't say no animals either. I believe it was Bencotter, who used to spin a tale about growing up in the west fork of the Bitterroot up around Hughes Creek and encountering a huge bull moose on the trail. He had to actually cut a trail for the stock to pass through, through some lodge pole up there because the bull moose wouldn't give up the trail.

JB: Oh is that right? [laughs] Well, I'm glad you told us that one.

[End of Interview]