

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 048-001, 002
Interviewee: Victor "Babe" May
Interviewer: Susan J. Buchel
Date of Interview: December 3, 1980

Victor May: We rotate the herds every three months in eight different pastures. The result in doing so is that only once every fourth year is a pasture grazed during the critical period when seeding occurs. So we can go on with natural reseeding of native grasses like that. With this kind of program we have brought the range back into good condition, at one time it was very poor. We still have our problems with noxious weeds. We work on them with chemicals, some of them, or try to get effective biological control.

Susan Buchel: Do you have much knapweed out there?

VM: We have knapweed, not a lot, mostly along the roadsides. It has not been as much of a problem for us as for others.

SB: What role does your four-wheel drive play in maintaining the range?

VM: We don't use the four-wheel drive to move the animals. We use the four-wheel for work programs, construction, fence surveys, animal surveys.

SB: In a year, what do you do with the buffalo, starting now, in December?

VM: Normally this time of year we pick up all the loose ends in the maintenance program. That is, we finish projects and get facilities ready. Then, in the winter months we do maintenance on equipment, the vehicles, and what little feeding is needed to do. We also make surveys of the animals, check them to see if they are where they belong. We do have to move them in January. Depending on the snow conditions, we move them on horseback, in particularly heavy snow we use snow machines.

SB: You move them in the winter?

VM: Yes, and then the first of April we move them again.

SB: Do you have certain pastures that are better in the winter?

VM: No not necessarily. Deep snow, if you have good grass, really doesn't affect the animals, these animals are fine in the winter months. Buffalo are very good survivors. If you have your grass in the condition it should be you won't have problems. Wind conditions will most often make the snow not too deep on the ridge tops, so you find they move to the ridge tops and feed there.

SB: Is it only the buffalo you move around?

VM: The others can move from one pasture to the other. The interior fences are made of forty-seven inch woven wire that stands about sixteen inches off the ground. This provides access to the antelope who will not jump the fence. They will go under it. Deer can jump over it or go under it, whichever they prefer. Elk can go over it.

SB: So they must not have the same impact on the pastures as the buffalo.

VM: No, you can say that the elk compete for the grasses, but they don't like exactly the same things. The deer and antelope eat forbs which the buffalo doesn't.

SB: When you move the animals from one pasture to the next, how does it work?

VM: We have to drive them from one pasture to another. Some of the pastures are not adjoining. We might have to move them from the north end of the range to the south side. It is all prescheduled, set up over a period of years. We might have to move through another pasture to get to the one we have scheduled.

SB: Is the whole herd in one group?

VM: The herd is divided into two herds actually. There is the large herd with about 180+ animals and a small herd with about 130 animals. The reason for this is that some of the pastures have more AUM's (animal use months) than others, we move them according to that too.

SB: What happens in the spring as far as your job goes?

VM: Well, of course you've got to move again, in April, This is the critical one because the cows are about ready to have their calves at this time. They start calving about the 15th of April. Most of the calves are born in May, but there are always some early ones.

SB: What do you have to do that is special to this move?

VM: Well, we don't run them like we would otherwise. The cows at that time are pretty spooky creatures. We go easy on them for that reason. They are a little more wild than usual, except after they have had their calf. They are really wild then. No, we just take it easy. We watch out that we don't disturb them more than necessary when we move them.

SB: When you move your larger herd, how many people do you use?

VM: Well, there will be a crew of maybe four of us, or maybe five, six. You have to have been around them for a while. They are definitely different than cattle. You have to know the

animals, know the range. You need to have a good horse. The horses don't work too well if they have been cattle horses, and vice versa, you wouldn't want to have for a cattle horse one that has worked buffalo.

SB: How is it different from herding cattle?

VM: They move much faster. You don't trail them along like cattle. They will move out fast, they will move at a distance from you. They'll just pick up and go.

SB: So you are quite far from them.

VM: About a quarter of a mile or so. They'll take off when they see you.

SB: So it isn't like the old westerns where the cowboy is right behind them?

VM: No, definitely not. These animals are pretty agile. They are pretty long winded, in fact they can move a lot faster than a horse for a distance. They can stay with you long enough to run a good horse into the ground. They'll turn too, one of them will just take off and if you try to turn him back into the herd, he will just wear your horse out. So you just have to come back and get them later. This happens every time that we have the roundup. We attempt to gather up all the animals on the range, there are always a few bulls that won't move up there. Not all the time. Sometimes there may be a cow. What we try to do is get the brand number on those so we know what we have. I think we've left as many as eight bulls in one area. They'll just go so far and then they just quit. In the annual roundup in October, they've just gone through the rut. Some of these bulls have been bumped around a little bit and there are a few cripples, sore spots. So they are a bit skittish. But we do know how to do that, we leave them and check on them later to see how they are doing several times. Most often they'll be alright,

SB: Would they eventually come back to the herd on their own?

VM: We'll watch them and if we get them close to the gates, we can open the gates to let them, through on their own or we can ride around them and bring them close,

SB: Do you have a formation you use to get the herd where you want it?

VM: We know what gates we're heading for, what area we've got to put them in. We have a series of alternate gates we can use if we don't get them through the gate we intended. We can corner them someplace else and shove them through the gate. These animals are pretty smart; they know where the gates are too. The thing about these buffalo, if you head them for a gate you want them to go to and they find a gate that's closed, you say, "Well, maybe I'll open the gate and put them through here." Well, nine times out of ten it is difficult to get them back to the open gate because they believe it closed and there is no escape for them. They're really intelligent.

SB: What do you have to do at calving time?

VM: Very little. We have very little problem with calving, not anything like domestic beef. Once and awhile we'll have a problem. Well, if we do have a problem it isn't that the cow can't have the calf. I can only remember one time in maybe thirty years. It may be an older cow that will show up with a prolapse. This happens once and awhile, not too often. Then we will have to destroy the cow. If it was a domestic beef you could get it in and work on it. If we attempted to get a cow like that and work it through the chutes at that time, we'd do more damage to her. We just end up destroying it, (later comment: we had one cow like this, this year, but then none for five years back, so this doesn't happen very often.)

SB: Do the buffalo have much problem with disease and parasites?

VM: They don't have all the diseases of cattle. They are susceptible to Bang's, or Brucellosis, and they're susceptible to Leptospirosis. Since we are not too worried about a short calf crop, we don't have much trouble. We are Brucellosis free because we carried on a vaccination program and have a confined herd. At the present time we don't vaccinate for Brucellosis. Now all the cattle that leave here at the roundup live sale show no signs of Brucellosis. We have some Lepto. They're working on that now. There is a vaccination for it and we vaccinate at roundup.

SB: Well, if you don't have to do anything with the calves, you must have a pretty easy life!

VM: We have no problem during calving, but they don't get on without a few problems. One area I can think of that we have to watch out for, check the buffalo for is tick paralysis from the Rocky Mountain Tick. We had some losses before we knew what it was. A tick will become attached to some particular spot, usually at the base of the skull or along the spine someplace. The buffalo becomes paralyzed. Some years we have it, some years we don't. If we find one like that all we have to do is pick the ticks and the fellow will be up and run over you! Not quite that fast. They're usually down to where they can't move when we come, because they're paralyzed. So we'll move them with a pickup and bring them down to a box stall, pick the ticks. Usually by the next morning they're back to normal. We may give them a shot of tick powder, dust them real good, and that's it.

SB: How do you get a paralyzed buffalo into a pickup truck?

VM: Well, these are the youth. They will probably weigh about six hundred pounds. You just slide them in! It takes about three guys to do it.

SB: So you don't do anything about the ticks right on the grounds?

VM: We have used some back scratchers with a chemical. It's on a post, with a rope. They'll rub on that and the chemical squirts out on the animal and kills the ticks. There are five posts, and they each have a five gallon container with a little pump on it, and every time the buffalo move this rope, that comes off at an angle, pulls a chain with a wick on it, and dumps the chemical. They rub their back or sides on the rope.

SB: Why do they pick this post to rub on?

VM: They're always rubbing on things - a tree, a rock. They'll scratch for these ticks. In these later years we've been restricted on chemicals, we can't use anything that lasts too long. So this lasts about twelve hours and then it's not toxic. The old chemical would stay toxic for a long time. I'm not saying this is right or wrong.

SB: So you still use this short-lasting chemical?

VM: Oh, we use it all right. This paralysis seems to occur on just two pastures on the range. One of the pastures is an open grassland without any trees.

SB: So do you manage then to avoid these pastures when the ticks are out?

VM: No, we still take turns at it. This doesn't occur every year. They have it too with domestic cattle. We do have to check every year.

SB: So, is that all you do in the spring?

VM: We have quite a bit of fencing to do, lots of fence to repair. We realign fences. We have two temporary employees that work ten months out of the year and they spend about eighty percent of their time building fences. This may not be all on the Bison Range because Ninepipe and Pablo are also under the Bison Range. Up until this year we had the wetlands of Kalispell, Swan Lake and we had fencing to do up there, patrolling to do.

SB: So there's no separate maintenance crew up those places?

VM: Well, there hadn't been, but it's been relieved somewhat. They've set up their own complex at Creston at the Fisheries up there. We have one person who works half for us and half for Fisheries, it was quite a ways to travel. Well, on the wetlands, all we'd do is fencing.

SB: Have you always had Pablo? How many maintenance men are there?

VM: Yes. We have five workers full time and two WAE's (when actually employed) who work ten months. They'll be laid off usually at the end of the year and start up again in the spring.

SB: What about in the summer, is there anything you have to do with the buffalo?

VM: Just check them. Of course, during the rut, which starts about mid-July up to August, all the big bulls move back into the herd. Prior to this time you find the bull herd in small groups, the mature bulls. They move back into the herd in July. They do a lot of rolling around to determine who the big daddy is. By the time the rut starts it's been pretty well established. They're moving in and out of the herd at that time.

SB: Is there anything you have to do at that time?

VM: No not really. It's pretty interesting to just watch. There's a lot of fighting at that time. Of course, we do look in on them to see whether or not we've got any with injuries. Some of them are even a little worse and don't recover.

SB: You must have a lot of fence repair that time of year!

VM: That's right. If they get close to the fence or across the fence, we've definitely got some fence to repair. Then in September, we've got the elk rut and the elk are hard on the fence in dueling. They get their antlers in the wire and can lift a fencepost out of the ground.

SB: That interior fence gives you the most maintenance problem?

VM: Most of the problem. If the buffalo are determined they are going somewhere, they'll go. The interior is just not as strong as the boundary. The boundary fencing is seven feet high with number nine wire, a pretty heavy woven wire. I can only remember one time when an animal went through that and that's when two large bulls were fighting right on the fence.

SB: Has that boundary fence been replaced?

VM: it has been completely replaced during my time. Built in 1910. The original was ten foot split cedar posts with hot creosote treating. I marvel at the way they built the thing with what they had to work with. Horses, wagons, and shovels to dig the holes. We pulled those posts out approximately fifty years later and they were sound. What was in the ground was sound. They had weathered away on top; they were rotten on top and on the sides. Understand that there are approximately 10,000 posts in that boundary fence.

In the early 50s our allotment was different than it is now. We were allotted \$1000, \$15000 a year for fencing. That didn't go very far. About all I did every year was some maintenance and maybe buy a few posts and a few rolls of wire. Then when you got the materials, you'd go put it up. And so in the early 50s we started to replace the boundary fence. We soon realized we weren't working nearly fast enough. The fence would be down before we got around, at that speed. So we changed the way we ran it. We were able to get through it all. We could keep a crew working all summer if we had one. We got temporaries hired and got the fence done in several years. I think it was five years or so.

You're looking at, right now, to replace that fence, somewhere between \$5,000 and \$10,000 a mile for material! So you can see what it costs. We've seen the cost of a roll of wire go from thirty dollars to, well, they don't even make it anymore. I have no idea what that wire would cost if you could even buy it. This 47" wire we use, with #9 wire on top and bottom, the rest twelve gauge, it's \$110 a roll. We used to buy the 55" for \$30.

The posts were tough to get so we went to a heavy-duty steel post, a ten foot post. It weighs 2.8 lb/ft, 28 lb of post, and we started out buying those for five dollars apiece which was cheaper than the wood post. But now they are pretty expensive. We went to steel posts because we didn't have enough labor to dig the hole. What we did on most of that fence when we went to steel was to pull it and put the steel post in the same hole to save labor. It went much faster that way.

SB: The whole thing isn't replaced yet?

VM: Yes it is, well, no, it isn't all steel. It's a good fence. It's all in good repair. We still have the bulk of that fence wire from 1910.

SB: So are you looking at a long life from those steel posts?

VM: With the wood we were looking at service life of fifty years. We don't expect that of a steel post.

SB: So, then, after the rut, do you have the roundup?

VM: Well, sometime after the rut. The rut is over the end of August and we have the round up the first week in October.

SB: Is there any reason why the roundup is in October?

VM: Mo, not really. Usually the weather is pretty good. We can get the animals in without too much trouble. It's early enough we don't have to fight snow, frozen ground.

SB: So, why do the roundup?

VM: We have a predetermined carrying capacity on the range. We know how many animals we can have out there. We manage the range as much as we manage the animals. In order not to hurt the range we can only carry so many animals. We had a survey that set us up with about 325 animals carried through the winter. That's all set up. Although we could carry more than that now because the range has improved. What it amounts to really is that in our disposal program, we sell the ones equal in number to the previous year's calf crop. Now, this number can be adjusted if we have an unusual number of losses, we can make it up at the next year's sale. We don't sell any calves; we have the age of each of those animals. And as we cut them we pick out the age groups we want to sell that year.

We find that buffalo start to go downhill after about twelve years. We don't keep too many in the herd over ten, except we have a few specially marked that we let live out their lives. What we end up with is about a sixty/forty split, sixty cows to forty bulls. As near as we can determine, in a natural state they were about fifty/fifty, although the mortality on the male is greater than the female.

SB: When you say that you have them marked to live out their lives, does this happen early, or just when they've reached a certain age?

VM: We mark those critters from when they were calves, or maybe when they were five years old we marked them. We have that in the records, where the mark is and what it is. We can tell, we can keep track of them during the roundup,

SB: And your purpose for doing that?

VM: To have a more normal herd, a more natural herd. To have some more older animals in there. We run the herd differently than a beef herd, in that we're not looking especially toward the money side of it. This is the difference, really.

SB: When you do your cutting, is there anything else you do at that time? You said that you vaccinate them.

VM: Well, or course we cut the live herd out, our sale herd. They get sent through the pens. It is predetermined what age groups we are going to sell. We take a look at the complete herd, maybe we have quite a few yearlings, or too many ten year olds,

SB: When you say you take a look at them to you are they individuals, do you pick out a certain ten year old, or just any ten year old?

VM: No. The only thing we may do when they come through, we know where these animals are being sold. If the buyer is looking toward a commercial herd, we try to give him really good animals to do him some good. We may have a grizzly old bull that's been knocked down a bit and has a broken leg, whatever. And then we know that a fellow, say, from Kalispell has bought several old bulls in other years for hamburger, we know it doesn't make a nickel's worth of difference if he gets one that has a lot of battles on him or not, they're all good, healthy animals. We'll make a judgment like that.

SB: So the roundup must be a whole different operation than just getting them from one pasture to another. How is that different?

VM: You're working close quarters for one thing. We herd the animals separately, say, herd number one we may work first, see. We put all those animals through the chutes, we'll sort how many we want for live sale, then we will take all the bulls out of herd number one and put

them in herd number two in their pasture, and hold them there. We alternate the bulls in each herd each year, which is one way of lowering the possibility of straight line breeding. As near as we can tell there have been no effects. We haven't introduced any new blood into the herd since back in the early fifties. There were some bulls brought in from Nebraska and Yellowstone.

SB: Did they plan to bring in new bulls every so often?

VM: No not really. They had the opportunity, we swapped them some. We found that the bull we got out of Nebraska was a little different animal then we had. Had a different conformation and color. We were able to see that for a number of years.

We really haven't had any problems. Yellowstone at the present time has a way of management that is a lot different from ours. They let theirs go on their own, and if they die they just become part of the food chain.

SB: So since you are working so much closer with the animals at roundup then while herding them, do you need a lot more people?

VM: Yes. It takes a good many more people because we have to have chute operators, we have to have people weighting, and mainly opening those gates. We need about thirteen people there on those gates.

SB: Does everyone just know what to do?

VM: If they don't, we have to teach them.

SB: Are you the one who barks out the orders?

VM: Well, I kind of assign the crew, yes. But, no, there really isn't too much to it. If you only have one gate to work, it is not too often you make a mistake! Those corrals are about ten feet high, and the reason is definitely for safety when you are working the gate, working the ropes.

SB: By the time the buffalo are at the corral are things moving a little slower?

VM: No, it's still a pretty fast operation. We'll have the herd in the holding pen up there and then there will be four riders who will make a cut. If we have 180 animals there, they will go up and cut twenty that would be a desirable number to bring in at a time. Then those come into the first corral. It's fairly large, it's long and you could hold a number of animals in there. Then from that corral we round them into a little smaller corral. It progressively gets smaller, but the time they get into the fourth corral, we can turn that animal into herd number one or herd number two or whatever. We are able to handle each animal singly and do whatever we desire.

SBs Other than at the round up, do you very often handle the animals individually?

VM: We mostly do it at the roundup. We have a special squeeze, it will hold a mature animal, down to a cow or yearling. If we want to doctor one for something, say maybe porcupine quills, we can put him there. If they have an injury, we can look at it, clean it up, or we can vaccinate it. We usually don't do everything every year, probably not too much in all on a very large percentage of the herd. Now this year we used something we hadn't used before when we vaccinated for Lepto. We vaccinate every animal that we put in the squeeze. The large animals were vaccinated with a special unit eight feet long to give them their shots.

SB: What is it, a big blow gun?

VM: No, a regular syringe mounted on a handle and the short needle is mounted on rubber to cut the chance of breaking it off.

SB: What other kinds of jobs do you get stuck with besides fencing and caring for the animals?

VM: Well, mostly I get stuck with what the crew gets stuck with. For example, this year we have an annual game count. We have to count deer, elk, antelope as well as buffalo. They're also figured into the carrying capacity. We ended up with 275 mule deer. We hadn't anticipated this strong surge in the last year, so we had a little herd reduction program. We took about seventy mule deer out. We processed them through the slaughter house and donated them to the schools for the hot lunch program. This year we also gave them the Salvation Army. We have things like that to do. Right now we're winding down the general maintenance program at this time.

SB: Do you maintain all the buildings too?

VM: Oh, yeah, we have the buildings to maintain. Picnic grounds too. Woodcutting, it looks like we're going to get back into burning wood more than we have in years. We get the snowplow in shape and such for the winter.

SB: What kind of arsenal of equipment do you have?

VM: We have a couple. There four-wheel drives, regular pickups, some trucks, dragline, dozer, some loaders and blade. If there's any particular maintenance to do that can wait till cold weather, we'll do it inside then. Better than freezing with some project outside. There is a certain amount of vehicle maintenance to do. Whatever comes up.

SB: Well, we haven't really talked about history, but who knows, what you do now may be history in ten years, the way things go. You said before one of the biggest changes was the emphasis moving toward people more and more. How do you see that happening?

VM: People were welcome to come in - to the headquarters area, and that was all. It was a program directed toward the animals and the animals came first. Then motor recreation started and people could travel more, the roads got better, I suppose, I don't know. Anyway, as a result, we had a lot more people coming in. We started to realize that the people own this place and they should be able to see it. So it was decided we would try it as long as there wouldn't be any interference with the wildlife. We would try it. So we opened the tour, temporarily it was a guided tour. Twice a day we'd take them out on the tour.

SB: Was there a set time that they'd meet?

VM: Yes. A set time. ten o'clock in the morning and two o'clock in the afternoon.

SB: When did you start this?

VM: That was in the sixties, early sixties. Then they improved the road. In '63 and '64 we worked over the road to High Point, graveled it. So then in the early sixties we decided to try the self-guiding tour. All the time tourism grew and it has worked out pretty well. We've had over 100,000 visitors a year without any great problems. Maybe a car wreck or somebody got out of line, or were where they shouldn't be, but all in all its worked out pretty well.

SB: With the self-guided tour, does someone still go around to make sure everything is ok?

VM: Yes. Not necessarily in the day time, but they usually get back to you if there's something wrong. And so of course we'll go out. Oh, somebody usually goes around there once a day. We always close it at night, make sure everybody is out and everything is ok. As I said, we had over 100,000 people in there. They all got out, most of them with their hides. We have had a few car accidents.

SB: if there's an accident, do you go out?

VM: We go out and help in any way we can. Usually if we hear about it, it's bad enough to call a wrecker for them.

SB: When did you start working there?

VM: 1946.

SB: What was your job then?

VM: The same, basically the same, though my job at that time - I worked in the shop on the equipment, was a mechanic's job. I must have liked the place. Anyway, I've been the Foreman since 1955.

SB: When you worked in the shop, were you ever called out?

VM: We had a smaller crew. At times there were only two of us in the maintenance end of it. We spent a good deal of our time out back. We have a lot more equipment now than we did at that time. At the present time we do have a full-time mechanic, but even he gets called out, like during the roundup or if something comes up.. We put him on the range.

SB: If you only had two people back then, how did you get it done?

VM: Of course, without the public, it took out a lot of the work. You see, we didn't have near as many tourists and we didn't have fourteen to fifteen acres of picnic area to mow. With the deer in there the way we worked at that time, most of them mowed the picnic area, there were deer all over. Fifty to sixty deer we fed in winter. Many more deer than there were people.

SB: Do you still feed the buffalo?

VM: The only ones we feed are the ones we hold down in the exhibition pasture. We're getting away from that now. Under the program we're coming into they're trying to get away from the tight situation where you only have an exhibition pasture. We will have a small, you can call it an exhibition pasture, but it's larger. There will always be buffalo there, but it will be an area of a couple hundred acres rather than twenty acres. You will see them in their natural habitat rather than the irrigated pasture they're in now.

SB: So you don't feed the buffalo.

VM: The ones on the range are on their own.

SB: You said you fed the seventy deer in the winter, you don't do that anymore? When did that change?

VM: No, well that changed about '70 – '71. But then seven to eight years ago, we didn't have as many deer as we had in the forties and fifties. We had many more deer on the range. Then we had a figure, but not a very accurate figure, of how many animals we had. Except for the buffalo, we made do with an estimate. We could see from year to year, in the fifties, that the estimate was real low because there wasn't any game count at the time. We would make a count of so many deer in an area and project that. We thought we were carrying around 450 mule deer at the time. So we determined to take some deer out of there. At that time deer were short enough in the State that the State would come in and trap them without assistance. They'd work with us and they'd take out 100 deer or so.

We had a program in the early fifties. The Indians cooperated with us and we took out deer to restock the reservation. We took out 445 deer! That's what we ended up with. We were a little underestimated! And then, it's a pretty long drawn out thing to catch these deer alive. We had to drive them to a point where we could trap them within an area and then move them

into a smaller area and then finally down to the corral where we could truck them out. The cheapest way to do it, we could see, was to hunt those deer. So we hunt them and donate the meat to the school.

We frown on public hunting; it's a good thing to stay away from. It would almost have to be a guided hunt. It would be good in some ways, but not very good operationally. So we don't get into that. That's one thing that has changed, we have cut down on the number of deer, we know how many deer we've got approximately. We know about how many elk we've got. We've a surplus of elk right now, about seventy-five head in fact. The State is very interested in them, but they are in a money bind right now. We have them to give to the State to stock wherever they want to restock. I'm hoping they can come up with the money to hire a 'copter for a couple of hours.

SB: So the money part is not a matter of "buying" the elk, It's just the people..

VM: The time, yes. The cheapest way on elk we found is to use a 'copter with a pilot who knows what he is doing. It doesn't take too long.

SB: You herd the elk with the helicopter?

VM: With the helicopter, oh yes. You can almost run them back down the road, you know. We do have a wing set up, a "v" trap. We can move them into there and catch them pretty easy.

SB: It seems like everything is pretty good as far as the range goes, the grasses. Are there any things that you would consider to be a threat to the buffalo range right now? I guess I remember reading in Elrod's report of the twenties, he outlines several threats to the Bison Range. People were still wanting to graze their cattle on it, the threat of fire; he had a whole list of threats which probably don't mean anything now. But are there any that could hurt the range?

VM: Offhand I would say, no. I could say one thing, but I don't know if it would be right or not... they've already made their threat, the Indians.

SB: is there some talk about taking the land back?

VM: Some of them, I don't know if you'd call them renegades, leaders, or whatever...

SB: The more aggressive?

VM: Yes. They figure it was stolen from them. It wasn't stolen from them, it was established about the time the reservation was established. Well, the reservation was established a little before that, and there were some Indian allotments within the boundaries of the range. But the reservation here is a little bit unique in that they allotted the land to each individual Indian, so much land, so there was much more land left over after each Indian had his allotment. So they

opened it to homesteading, which was at about the time that the Bison Range was established. The land, Elrod had a lot to do with it. I met him, by the way.

SB: When did you meet him?

VM: He was an old, old man when his daughter brought him up one time. I talked to her one weekend when she was out and she asked about bringing him out, if I would take him out on a weekend. I enjoyed it very much.

SB: Had it been quite a while since he had been on the range?

VM: Oh, yes he hadn't been there for years. As I remember it, he was in a wheelchair.

SB: Did he mention anything that he had noticed...

VM: Well, no, not so much that. Of course when he first saw it, they had looked at many more places than this one particular area for the Bison Range but apparently he and his party were to search for and find a suitable range. And they finally ended up with that area down there. So, anyway, we went to High Point. We had a picnic with him up there, and had a pretty good day, in the sunshine.

SB: He didn't really see any changes?

VM: I don't think so. I don't know how much looking he did, we must have looked at some grasses, etc. (back to the Indian story)... There were a few Indian allotments on there, so what they did with the Indians there, they paid them for any improvements that they had done. So if he had a cabin, it may even have been a small cabin with a horse barn and a set of corrals. They paid them for any improvements and relocated them, gave them another allotment. Some of them didn't have anything, I think they were satisfied at the time.

SB: So that is something that might be coming up.

VM: Well, it's been talked about, it's something you hear that someone is saying and so forth.

SB: Is fire any problem?

VMs No, it hasn't been. The last major fire we had on the place was in 1934, and it burned over half the range. I might also mention that the same time the range was overstocked with animals. There were somewhere around 700 head of buffalo, untold elk and deer, and so forth, all competing. The range wasn't in too good a condition, as far as "vigorous plants go. It burned over half the range. With very few, what you would call roads on it at the time, getting out there was by trail. It was all hand work. The feed was short anyway. So, in that period, the grass was so short that they held the buffalo in the spring and fed them hay. For several years they

would feed these animals in the corrals. They had some large pens there by the buffalo corrals we have today, and they'd feed those until the grass got long enough to turn them out. At the time they had a rodent problem - Columbian ground squirrel and pocket gopher, all competing for the grass that they had - with an oversized herd on it too. It was pretty tough. They had it pretty tough.

SB: If a fire came today and took half of the range...

VM: It wouldn't do it, we wouldn't let it! We hadn't better let it! No, we've had, well, about four fires this year. They were hard to find. We're much more mobile now than they were at that time, because roads are in there. We patrol it maybe more, we're more able to find out about the fires in shorter time than they did then.

There are more people in the area, the surrounding area. We go around to these people that will cooperate with us, and most of them will. We leave them telephone numbers they can call if they see a fire. It has worked out pretty well. We try to get several people that pretty well can cover the area. If we can get the cooperation from them, then we've pretty well got that area spotted.

Fires usually occur after a lightning strike. We had two fires one night, no rain, and we were able to get on to it quick enough to control them before they were large. This is where four wheel drive comes in. With one of these we're able to get the pumper, not right on the fire, but we didn't have to pack water too far. I think that we had about an acre burn. We do get many lightning strikes, frequently accompanied by heavy rain, but we normally have a few fires every year, usually from lightning.

Way back when, in the thirties and forties and into the fifties, we had steam locomotives up along the boundary fence and we got a few fires from them every year. So it would get so bad if you had real critical conditions, why, almost every time a train would go through, you'd take a look to see if we had a fire. Our boundary road we try to keep bladed so we have a fire break on the perimeter. The diesel locomotive has helped us a lot, as far as fires go.

People in the surrounding area, I guess we have pretty good rapport with the locals, they are very cooperative. If they see a fire, they come down and volunteer their services, will give us a hand on it. And we do have an agreement with the rural fire district In Moiese, that we will help them if they need us and they will help us if we need it. We don't always call on them, but they're there is we need them. And likewise we can call on the Forest Service for aerial drops if we need them. No, we never would have a fire like that again, never. It is something that is pretty critical that you have to watch, but is hasn't been a problem.

SB: Well, It sounds like you don't have any problems!

VM: Hah. Well, we could create some! Yeah, we have problems. Actually, when you look at the Bison Range it's just a big ranch, is about what it amounts to. I think you wouldn't find anything there that you wouldn't find in a big ranch.

SB: Is the weed problem pretty much under control, or is that still a problem?

VM: Of course you get one thing under control and you get something else. We'll always have goat weed, or St. John's Wort. We'll never get rid of it, but you can live with a certain amount of it, you can't live with it when it takes the range. Now, it isn't competitive with a good stand of grass. The weed supply would eventually die out if you can keep a good stand of grass.

SB: So by maintaining the range well, you're taking care of a lot of other problems...

VM: That's right. That's part of noxious weed control. We do have a chrysolina beetle in there, not so much this year, a year ago we had a terrific control program with beetles, probably better than we've ever had.

SB: Which kind of beetle?

VM: A chrysolina beetle, from Australia; I think that's where it originates. It feeds on nothing but goat weed. We had a real high population of beetles and they did do a lot of damage. They didn't kill the goat weed. They weakened the plant, they killed the mature plants, so we didn't get any reseeding in the areas they were in, so that helped. But the plants that we're looking at today, from that, are in a much weaker condition, and they probably won't make it if the grass can take over. So we don't have a solid stand of it, where we had goat weed there.

Knapweed, I don't know. We don't really have a problem, although we do have it along some of the roadsides. You can find it in any disturbed dirt in Western Montana. You can find knapweed probably a year after it's been disturbed. Now we have something really working against us in that, and that's the buffalo! He's one of the hardest animals on the range that you can imagine by wallowing, or just bedding down, digging up a little dirt here and there with their horns, dusting and so forth. This is where you get a foothold for those weeds.

Then we have another one that's coming in down there that we haven't had up until about three years ago, and that is Dalmatian toadflax which is very prevalent in the perma area down the river. It has been for a number of years. Suddenly we've got it, not in any solid patches or anything, but many, many small patches from a half a dozen plants to maybe an eighth of an acre. But we're working on that. We're keeping at it so it doesn't get a foothold.

SB: I don't want to keep you talking here forever, maybe I should just let you go for now. It think it's really valuable to get a basic idea of what's going on there, but I bet you've got some stories that are sitting there in the back of your mind somewhere. If you didn't mind I'd like to come back sometime and interview you. You must have stories. Do you have stories?

VM: I don't know of any!