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Interviewee: Gene Miller

Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Kjell Petersen

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Gene Miller: Okay, well, I'll start out like I have been, about growing up in the Swan. The first thing that I wanted to talk about was early on in the '40s, it got down to very cold and was below minus 40. Our thermometer quit working after minus 40. So, I don't know really how cold it was. But I got awake one morning and I could hear popping noises in the in the forest. I came down to my dad and I said, "Well, why are people shooting out in the forest this time and now?" He says. "That's just the cold. It's so cold that the trees are splitting in from the freeze, and so on." So, the next spring after having experienced that noise, and so forth, we went out and we could see where trees were actually split from the freezing of them.

The next thing I wanted to talk about was my first experience with lightning. We had a lightning storm come into our area. In front of our house and kind of along the field, there was a big old larch tree. When they cleared the land there, they cleared out a lot of lodgepoles, because there's a lot of little stumps around. But they left this big larch there. The larch was probably about anywhere from two to three feet in diameter, and about eighty feet tall. And then when the lightning came in, the bolt hit the tree, and the charge--you could just see it rolling down the bole. And all of a sudden, the tree just glowed and disappeared. Totally.

Afterwards, we went down to look to see what happened, and we found a couple of the pieces of the tree that was about a foot in diameter and about, oh, about ten feet long one was, and the other one was about five foot, and the rest of the tree was just chips and the shreds and things like that. The lightning went even down into the root of the tree, just like somebody had put a stick a dynamite in and blew the tree right out. There was a big hole there. My father says, "Don't go in there because you don't know how far the hole went underneath." And later, after we let it be there for a while, why, we went and looked, and it was four or five feet down into the ground, just the hole where the lightning had blasted the tree out of the ground.

The next thing I wanted to talk about was, again, later, there was another cold spell that we got in the Swan. And it got really, really cold. It was interesting to watch our cattle we had about a thirty head of cattle, and they were so cold that the cattle just bunched up, and they would stand in a great big circle, and then the ones on the outside got cold and then they'd push their way inside and push the ones inside out. And they'd just keep doing that, they kept rotating like that for quite a while. My dad finally said, "Well, we'll have to go out, give them more feed because in this kind of weather they need more feed." Also, he needed to get them water and we had a creek that went fairly close there and where they could get water. So, he went and chopped a hole in the ice to get to the creek. It was all right for a little bit but all of a sudden, evidently the ice jammed underneath the layer of ice, and it came gushing out of the hole and

made a great big skating rink, just pure ice everywhere you looked. It was like a lake there for a while, until the weather warmed up again and it could melt. But the cattle were able to get water, but they had a little do a little skating to get to it.

Then, that year again, we had some of our cows and our horses too, in a barn. Of course, most barns like you know, they get lots of cobwebs and spider webs all over the place. Interesting that time, why, the moisture from their breathing, coated these cobwebs, and it looked like an upside-down forest, because of hanging from the ceiling. And there were just lots of, you know, like upside down trees hanging down. It was quite a thing. It's just like a fairyland there.

Beth Hodder: How thick do you think the ice was from there, Gene?

GM: There were some of them that were probably three, four feet long, and they were probably, oh, a foot to eighteen inches, some of them. Somehow they attached to the ceiling and didn't break the cobwebs. I don't know how that worked, but it's the way it was. And of course, all the walls were pure white, too. I mean, they were just covered with a rime. So yeah, it was quite a thing to see. And of course, the cows and the horses didn't mind that too bad.

Then, the winter of '47, '48 was an unusual heavy snow that year. It was three to four feet deep, and it was hard to get around. We made our little trails as did the animals. They had their trails that they went to where they could get water or where they would feed.

But then the next spring, it stayed cold way into April, and it didn't melt a lot until all of a sudden, toward the end of April, the first of May, it started raining and melted the snow, and there were floods, I mean the fields, everywhere. Roads washed out, bridges washed out, people could hardly get around. It was it was awful. I think something like that happened after I left Montana for a while, because I heard the story, and I'm sure Kjell could tell us about that one, where the storm washed out Highway 2 all the way from almost from Essex down to West Glacier. They had to rebuild Highway 2 there. I'm sure maybe you know that, too, Beth; you can still see evidence of that. But that was a similar kind of thing where much of the roads had to be replaced.

Then, I left this part of the country and went to Kansas, and went there for '56 and '57, and it happened to be the years that had unusual amount of tornadoes. I can remember one night, I had an aunt and uncle live close to my college that I was going to, and they called me up and said, "You want to go out and watch tornadoes tonight?" They'll drive us around. So, I said, "Yeah, I'd be for that." So, my aunt and uncle picked me up, and we drove through the countryside. We could see funnel clouds coming out of the big dark clouds. And a lot of the tornadoes would just come partway down and then go back up again. Others would come all the way to the ground and just go a little ways around the ground and lift again. Then others would continue for, oh, two, three miles and then lift. And there were about fifteen, twenty farm buildings that were destroyed, and we could watch. One tornado hit the barn and pieces

of wood just flew every direction; it just like exploded and carried these pieces of wood way up into the air and threw them around and out in the fields and so forth.

It was in the year that there were two small towns, one in southern Kansas and one in Oklahoma, where there were about a hundred people in each, and they were totally wiped out. I mean, there was nothing, not a building left in either place. Fortunately, I think there were only two or three people that were killed in that one. But people in that country--tornado country, and that's Tornado Alley--they have their storm cellars, so most of them go there soon they know that there's tornadoes in the area.

Then I'll go on to Indiana. I moved to Indiana, went to school in Indiana, met my wife there, and we got married and lived there, and while we were living there, in 1965, we were in a town there that also was in direct line of a tornado. And, as was in the other places, most of the towns, when there was a tornado in the area, the fire stations would signal them and they would put a siren, just continuous then go "Ruur, ruur, ruur, ruur,, ruur, ruur" kind of like the fires, you know, but it would continue, not just like on fire stations. When there was a fire, they would go a little bit and then stop and start again. But they would just continue doing that. So, everybody within hearing distance of that knew that they better head for the storm cellars.

Well, we got the notice that there was a large tornado that had started in Illinois--we were living in northern Indiana--came all the way across Illinois, and there were what they called twin tornadoes. They were about a couple of hundred yards apart, but they were destroying just about everything for about a half a mile wide. They came through went all the way across Indiana, clear up into Michigan. And it just wiped out a tremendous amount. We were very fortunate because when the tornado came near the town we were in, there was a reservoir, a dam in the river there, and when the tornado hit the water reservoir, it started sucking up the water, which caused it to lift. It lifted and went over our town and came down again on the other side and continued on.

Just to the north of us a little bit there was a large trailer court that had about a hundred and twenty trailers in it. And the one tornado hit it directly and wiped everything out but one trailer that was on one edge; everything else was totally wiped out. There wasn't nothing there. So of course, the news came on and said the little town of where I was living, Goshen, but they said it been wiped out, had been totally destroyed. My parents living in Montana here, heard that and they thought, "Well, we will know what is going on. Maybe we won't hear from him."

All kinds of communication was knocked out. There was no phones or nothing that you could communicate with anybody. And after about three or four days, why we did get one of our friends that was a ham radio operator, and he says, "Tell you what, I'll get a hold of somebody in where your folks live, and we'll maybe let them know that you're okay." So that's what he did. Finally, after trying quite a while, didn't get anybody to answer in Missoula but somebody answered in Hamilton, and he said, "I'll call them." He gave them the phone number and called and let my folks know that we were okay.

But it was terrible. I mean, a hundred and fifty-six people were killed through the whole area. Lyndon Johnson came out to see the damage, and they were asking all hospital or nurses or anybody that could help to come to the hospital. They opened up one of the dormitories to use it as a hospital there at the college that we were in, and my wife had to go down there. And we were, of course, without electricity, we didn't have anything that go on other than just hoping everything's gonna come out, okay, because we didn't know where the tornado was or how it was doing.

I had been teaching there, and I had a third grade class. After a week--everything was closed for a week--because the streets and the highways and communication, electricity was all gone for almost a week, 'til they were able to get it restored. And I went back to school, and the first day of class that I was back, I learned that one of my students' families had been in the tornado and the mother was killed. The child couldn't come to school for a bit, because the tornado had hit them so hard that the dirt and the sand was embedded into her skin. It made it look like she had a birthmark on on one side of her face, where the sand and dirt was embedded into the skin. And of course, you would carry that scar for life. But she and her father and brother survived.

That was kind of the story here all the time; an ambulance came in, gathered people up and taking them to whichever hospital they could find could take people. They were taking them like to Elkhart, to South Bend, to, of the local hospital, even a couple as far away as Fort Wayne. They just take them, you know, they'd find somebody that was injured and they'd take them. It took about a week or so to finally get whole families together again, because one member of the family would be at one hospital, another member in another hospital, and so forth, and they just kept putting out on the radio. "If anybody knows where these people are, please contact the law enforcement so they could get them together again." It took about almost a week for some families to get together after that tornado.

And you could drive out through, and after the tornado, you could see where like refrigerators and beds and things like that were tangled in the tops of trees, just up in the air, way up in the forest. And you hear about the straw being able to be driven into the utility poles? They look just like a porcupine; they were just drilled right into there. One end of the straw and the hay where it was drilled right into one side of the utility pole. So, it looked like it had hair on one side where the wind hit it.

So yeah, and there was a little village, kind of by a lake, not too far, about five miles east of where we lived, and there were several fairly nice houses. We said, "Well, we gotta go out there and see them, because they were talking about how these houses are literally just picked off their foundation and set out into the lake. And that's what happened. They weren't destroyed--you could see them sitting in the lake with that roof sticking out of the water. Some of them were about two or three feet out of the water and others were almost completely covered. They just picked about four houses that had been beside the lake that were just

picked up and sent into the lake. So, it's unbelievable what tornadoes and winds and things like that can do.

Then about a year after that. We experienced one of the ice storms that the Midwest has. That was another experience where it came in, it started raining and freezing rain, and the streets were about two inches thick of just ice. The utility lines kept getting bigger and bigger. and bigger, until they would finally break. They were sometimes two and three inches in diameter with ice, and, of course, a lot of the trees would get coated with ice, too, and the branches would just break off and down onto the streets. Most of the towns there had lots of like maple trees and elms and things like that, that would break down into the streets. Why took them four or five days to finally clear the streets, and you couldn't walk. I mean, it was just glare ice, everywhere. And of course, our electricity went out again. We were without electricity for about four days that time. And that was quite an experience. We were glad to see that warm weather come.

Now we'll get back to the actual lookouts. I've talked about Priscilla Peak that I was on and the other times. And the first year I was up on Priscilla Peak, there was hardly any storms or anything like that, except that I talked about the storm that came in and they said, "Well, no need to stay on the lookout; you might as well go out and clean trail, 'cause it's going to rain for three days, and there was nothing to watch for as far as smokes or fires. There were a few little fires, but nothing to speak of.

Then the next year, as I said, why, I went up and then I got to see a couple fires that actually got to about four or five acres. I was pretty excited about that; that was something to see, some of my first experiences of actually seeing a forest fire that was moving and putting up quite as smoke. But then there wasn't much going on then other than a couple of lightning storms came through. You know, some years you just don't have much.

Well, then the next two years, as I said, I worked in the brush crew and as a backup fire crew. We were there--the first year, I think, it was in '58--we had been out working almost the full day. We had gone up and started working at eight and came in at five. We were just settling in and thinking, "Oh boy, it's gonna be a nice quiet evening," and I got a call: "Hey, they've got a fire over by Plains, Montana," which is about 30 miles away, and they said, "Gather up the crew and come." So we did that, while we had worked all day. We got to the fire, they put us on the fire immediately. They scattered the crew out. They put me on a pumper truck, and I was driving a pumper truck with one guy. What they had done, it was fairly close to Plains, and it was kind of just rolling hills, not really steep, and so they were using bulldozers to build a fire line around the fire. When I was on the pumper truck, I was supposed to go only where the bulldozer would go on, and just go around there and put out fires if any come up to the line, so that fire wouldn't jump across the line.

When I went into the fire, there was a little bridge I had to cross. It had a nice little stream in it. So, every time the pumper truck got empty of water, I had to go back down and fill it up at the

stream and do that. And at about midnight, they brought us some sack lunches and said "Oh, here's something to eat." So, we a little bit and then kept on working. Finally, eight o'clock the next morning, they said, "Well, you need a break, you better come in. We've got to give you four hours off." It was fortunately a pretty nice day. So, we went in and they gave us some breakfast. We were totally exhausted because we've worked almost, well, from eight o'clock the morning before 'til eight o'clock the next morning, continuously, hadn't had any rest to speak of. They said, "Well, we don't have a bunkhouse for you but you can go out and lay on the lawn and catch us a little rest if you can." So that's what we did. We just laid out in the lawn and got a little sleep. And four hours later, they came and woke us up and said, "Time to get back to work." We went back and worked for another twelve hours, totally exhausted. We were glad that, by that time, the fire was pretty much under control, and we can go back to our regular job.

Then after a few years being back in Illinois and Indiana and experiencing their types of storms, we moved back to Montana. Soon as I got back here, by the second year after we moved here, why, I said, "I get back to the Forest Service." So I did. And that's when I connected and started doing the relief lookout and going to different lookouts. I would go for two days. The regular lookout took two days off, because it was five and two in those days, you know, on five, of two, so they needed somebody to be up there for the two days off. That's what I did.

But this one time on Slide Rock--I was going to Mormon Peak and Blue Mountain and Slide Rock, and Iris Point as I had time--but anyway, this time, I came down to go to another lookout. I think I was going to Iris Point, but my boss called and said, "Look, Slide Rock got struck by lightning." And The girl up there was sure she was gonna die. She said the lightning had hit her, and she was just on our last legs. So, he got me and we went up there, and she was just a total case. We couldn't see anything on the lookout that indicated that the lightning had struck the lookout or hit her or anything. But she did have PTSD; she was totally beside herself. The boss said, "Well, I'll take her down, and we'll have the doctor exam her and make sure she's okay." And so on and so forth. So, he took her down, and I stayed up, and I fortunately had enough for a couple days to eat and I had other things, because I was going from the lookout to lookout, so I was pretty well prepared.

I was up there about a week and they had the doctor examine her, and the psychologist and everybody tried to get her so that she was feeling good again and so forth. And about a week later, she called and said that she's ready to go back. She wants to do it. She wants to go to the lookout.

So, the boss said, "Okay, you're sure you're okay."

She says, "I'm fine. I'll be okay." So he brought her up and, we got her into the lookout again and settled out. "How you feeling?"

She says, "I'm feeling good and everything's okay."

We got in the truck and started down the mountain. We hadn't gone more than about a half a mile, and she came onto the radio just screaming and said she couldn't do it. She can't stay. And she says, "I just I can't. I can't do it."

So, we turned around and went back, and I stayed then until they could get somebody else and that was two weeks. So, until they could hire somebody to take her place. But she never did go back, because she was too traumatized. So that was quite an experience.

Then, fires started and, I think, in the '70s and '80s, we started getting a lot more fires, especially around Missoula. We'd get some windstorms and one of the windstorms started swinging the powerlines on the south hills of Missoula, and the lines got close enough to each other they started sending sparks and started the fire underneath the power line. The fire took off, went up to Patty Canyon, which had several homes in it. They tried to stop the fire but it was a strong wind that day and it took off. And I could tell every time the fire got to a house, because the smoke was usually you know, like light colored, like most green trees, they make more steam than they do burning dark. When they got to a house, the smoke would turn really black. There were about seven houses that burned in that fire, and there wasn't anything they could do to stop them up there.

Then about two years later, there was another interesting situation where a couple of guys, one was a smokejumper and one was a guy that was working for the fire crew, and they'd hired some people had mental issues so that they could help out. But they were able to, you know, work with the crew, support crews, is what they were for the firefighters. So, this smokejumper jokingly talked to one of them, and said, "Oh, you know, I think we need to start a fire over here on Mt. Sentinel." The guy took him seriously, and went up and just above the university. had started the fire, and they couldn't figure out what was going on. Finally, he said, "Oh, oh! I know what's happened." The fire went up Hellgate Canyon and burned--of course, Hellgate didn't have any houses where it was there, but they burned the whole south side of the Clark Fork, in Hellgate Canyon. That was quite a fire to see, too. But of course, it was very steep country. Mt. Sentinel burned out pretty quickly. They were able to get it under control.

Then 1988 was a big fire year, probably most of you remember that. There were a lot of fires in the Bitterroot, everywhere. There was so much smoke coming down the Bitterroot River, that it just like watching a stream coming down. And at first, you could just see it come in and cover over Missoula. I thought, "Well, that's not gonna be too bad," and all of a sudden, it started coming in and just totally enveloped all the mountains, including me, and Blue Mountain, because I was at Blue Mountain at that time. It got so bad, the smoke got so thick that I couldn't even see the ground from the lookout.

I called them up and I said, "I can't see anything up here. All I can see is smoke."

"Well, there you just stay there because the wind'll probably blow the smoke out, and you'll be able to look around and see if there's any fire."

Well, I did. And that's what happened--this smoke did blow out every once in a while, but then it would roll right back in. So that was like two or three weeks it was just off and on would be completely smoked in. And it was terrible at that time. But we managed to get through it.

Then about let's see, I think it was in 1997 or so, I got a call one day that they expected some severe storms, and there was hail expected to come in it. They said, "Well, it sounds like the hail might be big enough that could break your windows. You better get down out of the lookout because breaking the glass could damage or harm you."

So I said, "Well, I'll watch it."

Well, it did come and at first it was just, you know, like pea sized hail and it kept getting bigger and bigger, finally got to be about the size of golf balls. I went down and got in my truck. It was so loud that I couldn't hardly hear anything in the truck. It was just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang all the time. After that I went out and looked at my camper that I had on the back and it looked like somebody had taken the ballpeen hammer after it and pounded dents all over the place.

It hit Missoula as well. In the west side of Missoula, it hit so many houses there, a lot of the houses lost their windows, a lot of the roofs had been destroyed because the hail just knocked it off. In fact, that storm went clear to Helena. And I think when they got to where they were in Helena that time, they got almost up the size of baseballs. There were many houses, and buildings and I remember destroyed in that one, too. So that was an experience too.

Then in 1997, I believe it was, or the mid '90s, anyway, we had another big firestorm. Another big lightning storm came through. There were fires popping up everywhere. Everywhere I looked, every direction I looked, I could see a fire, and as the day wore on, I could see thirteen fires in different directions and all the way around me that were over ten acres in size, some over fifty acres. It was just going up everywhere. And it got to be so many fires that they finally had to set up fire camps, several of them in the Bitterroot, in the Missoula Valley, and so forth. They brought people in from California. In fact, that year, the Los Angeles Fire Chief and some of his crew from Los Angeles came up and were in a fire camp down below me, and they came up to the lookout and tell me about what they were doing, that they would keep an eye on for me and said, "Well, we'll watch it for you. "But it was quite something. Of course, that went on 'til they got those fires out; it was several weeks. I had to get up every morning and watch them and have to report. Course, that's what you do on the lookout, is try to keep people informed of what you see happening. That kept me busy. They wanted me to stay up. Well, they let me get about two hours of sleep a night, and the rest of the time they said, "Keep an eye on; we want to know what's going on." So, by the end of the next day, I was getting kind of like a zombie. I could hardly think straight, because I'd been up for close to, I guess, twenty-four hours from the time that lightning started. until they finally said, "You better get some sleep," which I was very glad for. There wasn't any fires really close to me. So that was really unfortunate.

Then in 2007 was a big fire that was just north of me. It was again one of those times where there was a lot of dry lightning came through; in other words, there was no rain with it, and I saw the lightning strike to my northwest a little bit. Saw it come down and saw the tree make a firebrand and torched out, and I kept saying, "That fire is really going, and they said, "Well, there's so many fires right now. It's fairly near to the top of the mountain; it's probably not going to do much." They said, "We'll fly over it," and they took the spotter plane over it and said, "Oh, it's mostly alpine fir and small stuff, not gonna mount to anything."

About three or four o'clock in the afternoon, the wind changed direction, and that fire took off and went right over the top of Black Mountain, started down the other side. They could see it was moving. Of course, as I said, there were so many fires, they to set up priorities and decide which one they thought was going to be one needed to take care of, and that one kept moving. It came down into O'Brien Creek, which was the creek just to my north.

I told them, I said, "t gets down to the bottom of there, it's going to come right up my mountain."

And they said, "Oh, I don't think it'll do that."

But it did. And finally, they decided that they needed to do something. There was a graduate student that was working at the Fire Lab out in the Missoula lab. And they said, "We're gonna send a guy up there with an infrared camera, because we want to try these infrared cameras and see how they work. telling us what fires are doing. So, they brought this guy up with a camera. He was staying with me, and we would put the camera out toward the fire. Well, when the fire got a lot of smoke, I couldn't see where the fire was, but with the infrared camera, we could see where the fire was. It was interesting, it was definitely moving down into O'Brien, Creek.

Then the next day, why, it started coming up Blue Mountain. And the smoke was like I had before, when I couldn't see the ground again. I mean, it was just, I was getting smoked in. But fortunately, we had the camera and we could kind of watch where the fire was, so we knew that. Finally, I could hear by the radio on what the air spotter plane was saying, that it was moving up a mountain there. I said, "That'my gonna come this way, and it's going to cut off the road to come to the lookout." And I said, "I don't feel comfortable up here. I'm gonna come down."

So, they said, "Why don't you come down. Well, It seems like it could be."

And the guy with the camera--somebody brought him up, so he didn't have a way to get off if he needed to.

I said, "You'd better come down with me. And then you can do whatever you need to do down there, and they can decide what they want you to do."

So, he did. And so, I came down. Next day I came in to work to see what they want to do. And they said, "Well, the fire is crossing the road. So, we're not going to do that--take anybody up there."

I said, "What happened to the guy that was up there?"

They said, "Somebody went up and got him just before the fire crossed the road and brought him down. "They said, "When he came down his eyes were almost like on stems[?] because he was so scared."

But they got him down and safe. Then I was off for about four or five days, 'til they finally got the fire stopped. And it had crossed the road twice. We went to look and there was a road that went around the lookout about two hundred yards. And that road was what was able to stop the fire from coming up to the lookout, so the lookout was spared. But it easily could have been there and done that.

Then I guess my next experience with that kind of thing is when I first got acquainted with Kjell [Petersen with the Northwest Montana Lookout Association]. One of the guys that was in charge of lookouts in the Lochsa area, he contacted me and found out that I had been laid off there and couldn't go to Blue Mountain anymore and wondered if I'd be interested to go to one of the lookouts and in the Lochsa area. And I said, "Oh yeah, that'll be fine. Sure. I'd be glad to."

He says, "Well, that's a five-mile hike" and I said, "Well that's okay."

So, I went home and told my wife about it.

She says, "I want to go with you."

I said, "Okay, we have to carry everything Iweneed."

Well, they had water and wood up there, but that would be it. So, we had to take our clothing and food, and everything else we'd need for the five days we were supposed to be up there. And I had told Bill, the guy that was in charge of the lookout, I said, "Well, you know, this is in the September. And you know, there's a good chance of getting snow at that time."

"Yeah," he says, "I know, but we've agreed to staff the lookout until the end of September. So, I want you to go up."

And I said, "Okay, that's a go."

We got to the trailhead, and it had started raining--well, we went up the night before to the trailhead, because it was about fifty, seventy-five miles from our house to the trailhead, so we didn't want to try to drive that and then walk up. So, we went up and stayed overnight in the

back of the truck, slept there, and then got up early the next morning. Well, during the night, we heard patter of rain on the roof, and we thought, "Well, I guess we're going to go up on the rain." That's what we did. We put the gear on and we put on as much of our rain gear we had covered everything that we could to keep it dry and took off and we went up there. It was five miles, as he said, and there was a guy that was up there. We called him and we said, "We're on our way."

He said, "I'll come down and meet you, and then I'll show you up and take you up to the lookout."

When we were within about a mile of the lookout, why, here he comes. And it is raining, trying to turn to snow a little bit, was kind of rain and snow mixed, and we were kind of glad to see him, because we were getting kind of wet, and didn't know how far the lookout was and so forth. He volunteered to take Myrtle's pack and I said great; he carried the pack up and we went up. We got up to the lookout. He showed us things, and he was a younger fellow than we by far. Anyway, he took off down the mountain. We said, "Call us when you get down." An hour and a half later, he was down and he went five miles an hour and a half and I couldn't believe it.

But anyway, he got down and we said, oh, let's set up. He had the fire going so there was air. Then we went to bed that night after it kind of got dried out a little bit, went to bed, and got up the next morning and there was two inches of snow on the ground outside. We thought, "Oh, well, it probably will clear off and be nice." And it did that. But it was cold, it was just about thirty-two degrees, and, of course, the lookouts are not made for keeping warm. It did clear off. Interestingly enough, when I looked out the window, there were two robins hopping around in the snow. But I told Myrtle, I said, "Boy, the stove that was there didn't have a really good way to control the draft and the drafts were rusted out. It would keep you warm, but you had to keep throwing wood in constantly to keep it that way, to keep it warm. So, I went down, and they had wood down on kind of a shed underneath the lookout and I said, "This is not gonna be enough wood. We've got to get some more wood 'cause we're not gonna have enough to the end of the time up here."

So, we took the crosscut saw. There had been a fire going through that area a few years before, so there were a lot of dead snags around. I went down a couple hundred yards and cut a tree down and carried it up. We sawed it up and brought it into the lookout and thought, "Wow, we feel pretty good. We should be okay now."

Well, that was on a Monday and I said, "It's a pretty nice day, except at about six o'clock in the evening, because another storm's probably coming in." I thought, " We'll deal with it." We got up the next morning, that was on Tuesday morning, and there was six inches of snow on the catwalk. It snowed pretty much all day Tuesday, and by Tuesday night, why, Bill called up and he said, "Oh, I just talked to the fire management officer. and he said the forecast is some more snow and storms. The guy that was supposed to take your place is not going to come up, so why don't you just decide to take inventory of everything you've got in the lookout, because

we're going to close the lookout. Take everything in the inventory, because they had taken up some food that other people left, and all these supplies and everything else."

I said, "Okay, we'll do that. But I'm not coming down tonight." It was Tuesday night.

All night, of course, it snowed, kept seeing it snow. It was cold. And I'd have to get up about every three, four hours to put wood in the fire to keep it going. I did that, and finally about four o'clock in the morning, I just said, "Oh, I'm just going to stay up now. I'm going to start the inventory." So that's what I did, and I left Myrtle asleep.

But it had continued to snow, so about eight o'clock, we ate some breakfast, and I said, "t's about time to go." By that time the snow was about eighteen inches deep. And Myrtle was wondering, "Are we going to find our way out here?"

I said, "Oh yeah, we just go down the hill. You'll find the road." But, yeah, I knew where the trail is. The snow would leave kind of an indentation. So, we got up and it was snowing, still snowing. And we packed things up and started down. We called Bill and said that we're on the way. He says "Well, I'll come to meet you. I have to stay until I think it was ten o'clock. He says I had a check in about ten. But as soon as I'm done checking in why I'll start out."

We went down. About a half a mile down below the lookout, why, here's a big animal track walking down the trail. It was a moose who made moose tracks, we could tell that, and we followed it for a ways; it stayed on the trail and we kept going about three miles down. The snow change to rain. We kept walking. Well, we got down to within a mile and finally, here comes Bill, and by that time, of course, we were just soaked again. And he again, helped us out and carried Myrtle's pack and we went on down there, and he was staying in a cabin. It was Elk Summit. There was a campground near there, and he was to be taking care of the campground.

So, when we got down to the trailhead, he said, "You come on over here and I'll give you some soup before you head out." Fortunately, I could see that the roads weren't being snow covered at that time and that was good, you know, I didn't worry about that. So, we headed for home.

Then the next year is when Leif contacted me about coming to the other lookout and I think that was the year that I went to Cooney and then to Firefighter and that's when I met you.

[Beth]

So that was a good summer, everything. We first went to Diablo [Lookout] in the middle of August and it was beautiful. It was lovely. We could see the whole Bitterroot range from the west side, and we could see seven lakes from the lookout. It was a beautiful area and fine, and then, of course, I came down from Diablo and then I went to Cooney. After being on Cooney for a few days I went to Firefighter and got an experience there for the refrigerator quit working on me.

BH: It was famous for that.

GM: Yeah. And so I had taken frozen chicken, thinking that it would keep, you know, with a refrigerator, but it thawed out. Did you have to take care of that stinky chicken?

BH: No, no.

'Cause the chicken had spoiled in the refrigerator before I left it.

BH: I don't think you left it.

GM: I just put it in the garbage, but I have plenty to eat. I didn't have to worry about that So that was an experience.

Then the next year, I said, "Well, we're ready to go back to Diablo." It was beautiful that year that we were up the second year. I got the Lochsa, the ranger station, and they said, "Well, there is a fire down below here, you'll be able to see it when you get to the lookout it; should be okay. Doesn't look like it's going to do much."

So off we went, and interestingly enough, it was raining again. So, we got baptized with the rain there. But the rain just lasted until we got to lookout and then quit. We were lucky on that one. And things went pretty good. And about two days later, I guess it was, they called us again at the lookout and said, "Hey, we're evacuating everybody in that area. The fire is going up the Lochsa River and it could cross the road where you've got to come out, and we're evacuating everybody in the area. "

We thought, "Oh, wow, I guess we better go."

So, we headed down and got to the to the truck and headed out. I thought, "Well, we're going to be okay."

We got down and the fire hadn't crossed the road yet, but it was getting close. It was smoke drifting across the road. We got to the Lochsa [Ranger Station], checked in, and left the radio there. We said, "We'll eat lunch at the Lochsa Lodge."

We did and got done eating lunch. And I said, "Well, let's go home," got out to the truck and it wouldn't start. And I thought, "Oh, what's happening now?" And it had started well when we were at the trailhead. And somebody said, "We'll jump you. It sounds like the battery's dead."

I thought, "Oh, aren't we lucky, because what would have happened if the battery would have been dead at the trailhead."

So, they jumped us. They got the truck started and we drove home and I didn't stop the truck until I got to where I could get a new battery. But I was pretty glad to get there.

Just some of the other highlights of being on the lookout, and a lot of you, I'm sure, can I'm sure relate to these, is that a couple times when the lightning came down and, actually I was on Blue Mountain. I think the lightning struck the lookout about three times on different years that I was there. As I told you about the one where the lightning struck the guy wires. It started the fire underneath the lookout, and a couple other times where, and I'm sure you've seen this, where the lightning came down made a blue snake along the railing called St. Elmo's Fire. That was kind of an experience to see that too, where you had a blue snake going around you there. That was an interesting thing to see.

And I saw many; in fact, I had four fires within four different years where they were within fifty yards of the lookout. One came down and the lightning struck a couple trees that were standing just below the lookout a ways, and it came down the tree. The bark just went flying, not quite as bad as the one I told earlier. But it just made a streak down the tree. When it got to the ground, it just followed the route and the dirt just flew; it was about probably twenty-five yards. It just flew over there, and it made just like a ditch. It was following a root of that tree, and it made it just like a little ditch right where the root had been. The tree beside it actually caught on fire; the one where the lightning struck didn't burn--the one beside it burned.

That was quite a thing to see, and of course, I called them up and said, "I've got a fire right beside me here."

And they said, "We'll send somebody soon." And they did.

Then another time, they called me and said, "There's gonna be another severe storm. with high winds. Be careful; just make sure you stay in."

Well, of course, when you get these high winds in a lookout like that--at least in Blue Mountain Lookout--was when the wind would start blowing and your lookout starts vibrating. It's kind of like being in a ship on rough seas. And you just shake and roll around and so forth. I looked out and there was a tree, a pine tree, about a hundred fifty yards, I guess, below the lookout, and I was watching and it was just bending almost to the ground. All at once crack! It was a tree that was about, I would guess, fourteen, fifteen inches in diameter. It just broke right off. And there were several other trees that I watched that broke off too, at that time, none. That was the biggest one.

And then there was a couple places to my southwest where, I guess, they call it a wind shear, where there was like an area of about, oh, I'd say about five, six acres, that every tree just fell down flat. There was nothing standing afterwards. It was quite a thing. It was just like somebody had clear cut it. And I could watch that, and it took quite a while for that to grow back.

Then the other thing is, of course you get to see when you're on the lookout is the Northern Lights. They come up every once in a while, and they see blue, green and blue streaks across. And one time was very interesting. I was experiencing watching them--Northern Lights--and all of a sudden, I noticed that they were red. I didn't think that is the Northern Lights; that must be a fire. And I watched it and I thought that isn't acting like a fire. Finally, I realized it was Northern Lights. It was a red Northern Light, rather than the green and blue that you usually see. It was quite sizable. It went on for I guess about forty minutes that it was shooting up in the sky with red streaks, just like it was a fire.

Then, of course, a couple of other things that you get to see is the meteor showers, the Perseids, they've come every August. And they're, of course, fun to watch, like the falling stars and comets. Every once in a while you see a comet going across.

I got to see a couple eclipses when I was on the mountain, watch the lunar eclipse, I guess it was, where the moon blocked out the sun and watched it go by and, of course, had to be careful that they didn't look at it at the wrong time. But you could see just the glow around the moon where the sun was shining.

These are some of the interesting things. Well, yes, the comets; once in a while you'd see a comet streak across the sky and toward the end of the last years that I was up there, we could watch the space station and watch the different stations that people had put up there. You could see them. They weren't stars they were moving. And they're moving in a certain direction, so you knew that they weren't the stars. And yeah, there was many interesting things and I guess that's pretty much all I have to say tonight.

BH: That's fascinating.

Kjell Peterson: Gene, I wanted to let you know that one time in the mid '80s. I was up to Powell Ranger Station during the winter for a couple of overnights and it got powerfully cold and I got to listen to the trees explode down, and then when you go out the next day and you walk around and you find these trees that are just split from top to bottom. It's pretty amazing. So I really identified with that.

GM: Yes, yes. I couldn't believe how they did that, just like somebody took an axe and split 'em.

KP: Right.

GM: Right. Yeah, the power. There was one other time I had a lightning storm come through. And I saw it strike, it was a larch down below and north of the lookout. And I thought, "Oh boy, but that's gonna be a fire there." I kept watching and watching; nothing ever happened. So about two or three days later, I said, "I'm go down and see if I can see where that lightning struck." And I got down there, and I thought, "Well, gee, it's got to be in this area somewhere. It can't be any further than this." And I started looking around and I saw pieces of fresh wood on

the ground. I thought, "This is it, it's got to be right here somewhere." I started looking around, and I couldn't see any tree that looked like it had any damage, because you often see that where the lightning comes down, that leaves a streak on the tree. And nothing, I couldn't see anything. Finally, after I stood there and looked for a bit, I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. There's a tree there that's leaning right up against each other. I thought, "that's strange." Then I looked up a little higher, and here it was a stump that was about fifteen feet up. And what had happened, the lightning had struck the tree, blew the center of it out, the top of it came right down beside the stump, leaning against it. And how it could do that is beyond me. But that's what happened. It was stuck into the ground right next to the stump leaning against it, and there was just few pieces of wood that where it blew out the center of it. And that was one of the interesting things.

Then, of course, the lightning strikes struck where the telephone lines went through. I saw a couple times where it did that. I think I told you about the time that the lightning struck a tree that was where the telephone line came up, and came up and I hit the old crank phone yet. That was back in the '70s. And the one that struck, well, with it was kind of interesting, because there hadn't been many storms in the area; in fact, I didn't see any lightning. And I didn't realize that there was a storm cloud forming right above me. Ordinarily, if there was lightning in the area, I would go down and throw the switch so there would be no chance of the lightning hitting the telephone line. But I didn't think there was anything around, and all of a sudden kaboom.! Right above me. Of course, it surprised me, and then, of course, what happened was that the lightning had struck the tree that the telephone line was on and the lightning came right up the line and just fried my telephone. It just melted everything inside of it. And so that a few days later, I thought, "Well, I'm gonna go down and see what tree it struck." I got down there and I couldn't see it. Finally, I saw the tree, oh, and it came down where the staple was that was holding the wire to the insulator. And, oh, yeah, there's no insulator there. It's just the wire. And the insulator had just totally disintegrated, and the wire was holding the telephone wire; of course, it was grounded out, but it had to totally destroyed the insulator.

BH: So, Gene, did you ever have any fires that really frightened you up there?

GM: Well, the Black Mountain fire that came up that I had to leave. Yes. I was glad to get off of that one. Because it was it came within about two hundred yards of the lookout, if I'd have stayed. They kept me down until they were sure that the fire was out. But yeah, other than that, and of course I said when I saw the lightning strike the trees right next to me., I had three of them that besides the one that struck the guy wire and start the fire underneath me, and then the trees that I said where they came down and made the ditch. Then there was another tree not far away that the whole top of it broke off from them. Then lightning came down and the tree just fell over. That was close enough that I could see all of that action. And I said that I think I had [been] more frightened from the people than I did from the--. As I told you before about experiences of people coming up in the night, and that was more scary than the lightnings, and the storms, and so forth. However, I did have quite a few of those, too.

BH: Well, Kjell, have you got questions or--

KP: No, I think I'm just--

BH: Happy camper?

KP: Happy camper listening to those lookout memories because they just kind of wore my--

GM: You could relate.

KP: Absolutely.

GM: Good. So, Beth, have you experienced some of those, too?

BH: You know, a few; not many, because my years as a volunteer, you know, were few. I haven't volunteered for the last couple. But you know, I did have some experiences that were pretty amazing. Yeah, and I can relate.

GM: Yeah. Lookouts for special.

BH: They're definitely special. Yeah, they are unique, and, you know, to be able to experience that. But you know, for you with your whole career pretty much, as what did you do?

BM: I was a school teacher.

BH: When you weren't a lookout, you were a school teacher.

GM: Winter, fall, winter and spring, I taught school in the middle grades, sixth, seventh, and eighth, mainly for thirty-nine years.

BH: I'll be darned. What schools, or school?

GM: Yeah, I taught for nine years in Indiana. And after being there for nine years, I came back and started in Missoula. I taught at about seven different schools because being in the middle school I got caught. Missoula had a high school district, and they had an elementary district separate for several years. Then they decided, well, that wasn't very wise, it could use the money more wisely than that, and rather than having two administrations, they could just have one. So, they decided to take the sixth, seventh and eighth grade out of this, because there was K through eight schools. And they decided to take the sixth, seventh and eighth and make middle schools for them. And then they had the K through five schools.

While I was teaching seventh and eighth grade at that time and got moved around, I went to another one school, and I was there for a little while, about two years. I decided that I wanted

to go to another school; I didn't like what was happening at the school, because there were kids that were failing, and nothing was being done about it. And I couldn't stand that. So, I asked to be transferred, and I transferred to another school, was there about three years, and they closed it. So, I had to move again.

Then at that time, there were too many people in the sixth, seventh and eighth grade. and they said, "Well, we can give you a job in in sixth, seventh, or eighth, but we'll have to bump somebody out, because there's too many teachers for the places." I said, "Well, there's a fourth grade position, and since I had a K through 12 license--in other words, I could teach anything from, kindergarten through high school--that I felt, okay, I'm getting towards the end of my career. So, I figured it could stick out maybe a few years at fourth grade and I actually enjoyed it. So, I taught fourth grade. I was there for a few years, and they closed it and I got moved to another one. And people said, "Don't come here. They're gonna close the school. "But I didn't, and then I decided after thirty-nine that was enough.

BH: You lasted longer as a lookout.

GM: Yeah. Right. Yeah, that's right. Because I continued working lookout after I quit school, because I retired from school in 2001, and last this year was the first year I haven't been on the lookout.

BH: Well, I hope to see you back up again.

Well, I hope to, Last year, my wife had fallen and injured her shoulder, so I didn't feel right leaving her at home to try to take care of things. I said I better not go. So, I didn't go. I was scheduled for Cooney, but-- And found out later it worked out all right, because there was a fire person that was injured in Swan District that they needed to give a job. So they put her on lookout, on Cooney where I was supposed to be. So that worked out. But hopefully maybe I'll go back next year. How about you?

BH: May go back. What about Kjell, too?

KP: That's just so far away. Who can think that far yet? [All laugh]

GM: It's a couple months.

KP: That's a long time in my world.

GM: Yeah, I'm not sure, I kind of have to see how things go here. But, you know, when you get in your 80s, you're not as spry as you used to be climbing those lookouts.

BH: Yeah, it does take it out of you after a while.

GM: Yeah, it does. And carrying the stuff up the stairs seems to be more of a challenge. I didn't used to think anything of it. But it is a lot more work now. And I used to always, like I said, I always had a dog with me, and the dog we've got now doesn't do stairs, so I would not be able to take her. She's a Corgi and she's got short legs. So, she'd have to stay home. I'd have to go by myself. I'll have to see. I haven't talked to Leif [Haugen] yet.

BH: I'm sure he'll be in touch.

GM: Yeah, you know that I trained Leif for the lookout.

BH: Did you?

GM: On Blue Mountain? When he started.

BH: I'll be darned.

GM: He came up and spent two or three days with me on Blue Mountain, and then after being there, he said, "Well, I think I'm ready to go." Interestingly enough, they said, "Well, the guy that was on Morrell Peak by Seeley Lake needed to come down and wondered if Leif would go over there. And he said, "Yeah, I want to go." So, he had some Morrell after learning to work on the lookout at Blue Mountain. So, I've known Leif ever since. It's been quite a while ago.

BH: We may have to have some stories with you and Leif together.

GM: Yeah.

BH: Yeah. Well, Gene, thank you so much. And if there are opportunities to have you back, I'd love to do that again, too.

GM: Well, thank you. I enjoyed this. It was fun to do a little reminiscing.

BH: Yes. Yeah.

GM: Hope it wasn't too long or too boring.

BH: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Real boring. No, we've loved every minute. Thank you. Yeah. And take care.

GM: Thank you very much. I appreciate you doing this. And I'll be interested to see what happens of it.

BH: Yeah. Well, look for it at the university, too.

GM: I understand that you are the author so you'll be able to transcribe it, huh?

BH: That's it.

GM: Okay, well, good luck.

KP: Thank you, Gene. Take care.

BH: Thank you very much.

GM: Thank you. Good night.