

Oral History Number: 163-006

Interviewee: Harvey Henry Weirich

Interviewer: Kim Taylor

Date of Interview: August 12, 1986

Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project

Kim Taylor: This is Kim Taylor interviewing Harvey Weirich for the Smokejumper Oral History Project at Camp Paxson on Seeley Lake, August 12, 1986.

To start with, can you give us a brief biographical sketch?

Harvey Weirich: Of where I was born and raised? Yes. I lived in Northern Indiana all my life. My father always worked in a factory, and I was one of ten children. When I was 17 years old, I quit working in a factory...I quit going to school, excuse me—high-school school—and started working in a factory. My parents were never really wealthy, and that was one reason I quit school. Then I got drafted when I was 19. I lived in small towns, or we either rented a house in the country and this kind of thing.

KT: How did you go about getting C.O. [conscientious objector] status?

HW: Simply by applying for it. My family, of course, was always a church background and church-oriented, this kind of thing. Where I lived, it was a matter of applying for it, and of course, the draft board, them kind of people had to okay it. They gave their approval as to whether I could have that status or not, and go. Other than that, there wasn't any special thing that I done to have the status of being a C.O. At that age, I was 19, and I think I was very young for my age. I would say that, much as anything I probably applied for C.O. because of my background and upbringing, but after I was drafted, why, I felt very definite about the position I did take, and definitely wanted to stay versus having thoughts, perhaps, about changing and leaving. Along with that, I did want to do more than what I was doing. I was in a total of three years. The first year I was in a camp in Iowa where we done soil conservation work—dams and irrigation and this kind of thing. So I applied for the smokejumpers. Also perhaps at that time, I really had very much firmer convictions that definitely this is what I wanted to do. I didn't want to go to the armed forces. I applied for smokejumpers, and I was accepted so I done that for two years.

KT: What kind of difficulties did you find in the application process for C.O.?

HW: At the very beginning?

KT: To get your status as a C.O.

HW: I didn't have any problems at all. I just filled out the forms as to who I was and my background and all the questions. I had no problems whatever of getting the C.O. status.

KT: What interested you in becoming a smokejumper?

HW: I had always, from a kid up, made model airplanes and had always thought about flying, but I never really thought about jumping. I had always thought about flying. I had the opportunity...The opportunity was available while I was in the camp where I started at, and so I just signed up for it. At that time, I was 19 years old, and of course, you think a lot different about doing them kind of things as you do now. I recall, you had to get signed papers from your parents to do this. I was very concerned that my mother wouldn't sign them for me to allow me to do it, but she knew how bad I wanted to go so she did sign of course.

I come to Missoula at Ninemile in '44. I took the train at Ninemile and was up in the McCall site camp. Then, that winter, at the end of the fire season, I transferred back to the Denison camp in Iowa, and I suppose, as much reason as anything, is so that I could go back home on my furlow time, see. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have had the money to that—to go home from Idaho—but by the government paying my way back there, why, I did. The churches at that time paid is five dollars a month, and my parents never had money to give me. Perhaps that's why I done that. Then, right away, the next spring, I don't know exactly how I applied or whatever, but I came back to Ninemile in the spring of '45, and took like a week of training and two or three jumps and went back to the McCall. Altogether, I made 22 jumps, and I think, like 11 fire jumps.

KT: Can you tell us a bit about the training at Ninemile?

HW: The training at Ninemile?

KT: Yes.

HW: I liked it very much. I like the outdoors and hiking and, oh, the whole atmosphere for me to be in the woods and isolated—that kind of thing. I remember that, for me, I thought we had exceptionally good food, and I recall they furnished our trousers and our shoes. I just enjoyed the whole thing. I was 21 and 22, and I had no ties at a home whatsoever, in regard to being married or a girlfriend or anything like that. I loved airplanes in all aspects.

KT: Why don't you tell us a little bit about the airplanes that they use while you were a smokejumper?

HW: The Ford Trimotors and the Travel Airs?

KT: Yes.

HW: I made my first jump from a Ford, and I jumped on the Ninemile airport. I recall that the wind blew me over to the rail fence, and I'm sitting there on the ground and my best friend, I

guess, at that time was Les Gaeler (?). You maybe know the name, he's been here. He come over there and asked me if I was all right, and told him as I was sitting on the ground. He says that I told him, "This is really a very serious business." This is first response to him.

I thought it was all right, and I made seven jumps, I guess, for the training. I jumped out of the Travel Air a number of times. I suppose more often than the Ford. I liked the Ford, and I liked the Ford pilots that would fly us in the mountains and land us at various airports. Landing at the airports were very unique, because of the approaches that you take, and you get down between the mountains and this kind of thing. We'd fly eye-level to lookouts sometimes and hit updrafts and this type of thing. All in all, it was a very unique experience for me.

KT: What kind of rapport was there between the pilots in the smokejumpers?

HW: Kind of what?

KT: Relationship.

HW: Oh, yes. That was one thing that I'd sure like to say, is that...I'll admit, I was probably very young for my age, and maybe a very naïve, but as I recall everything, overall—the relationship between the people and the Forest Service—I thought, was always exceptional. I don't recall bad incidents whatsoever. I don't say there weren't any, but I don't really recall any person-to-person or anything like that. I thought they was always a very exceptional good to us.

KT: Did you sense any feelings of animosity because of the fact that you were C.O.?

HW: No, no. This is a thing that kind of surprised me, in a way. I used to think about it was because you used to hear a lot of stories about other people in other places and other circumstances. I never heard them kind of things with the Forest Service, not that I know of. I don't recall, to this day, having the boys, like here today, relate any kind of stories like that. I always thought that was very exceptional, because, of course, I had a lot of other friends in a lot of the places then and later on in years—in later years—and I heard a lot of various stories about this and that and so on and so forth. I always felt that was a very exceptional thing with the Forest Service personnel that we dealt with—in their relationship to us and in the way they felt about us and the way they treated us. I always really appreciated that.

KT: Let's go back to some of your fires. What's your most memorable fire experience?

HW: Well I was on, I'm pretty sure, it was 11 fires. I have them on a map at home, of course, all of them that I went to. I was on two fires that that ran away in the treetops. Of course, you hear the stories about, like Mann Gulch today, they talked about the people that got burned and everything. At that time, I recall that the Forest Service used to give us a chalkboard lessons in regard to this—drafts and canyons and this kind of thing. I was on one fire that ran away. We were building a fire line, and I was one of the guys that made a firm decision that we were

leaving. Some of them wanted to stay, because we had a good line built and the fire kept jumping over the line for no reason at all—20, 30 foot over there would be another fire. You'd go down there, and contain that little thing and you thought you had the situation under control, and you'd come back and there'd be another one over there. All at once, maybe one tree took off. I started thinking about where we was at, in relation to what could happen and where we was going. I recall that me and one of the other boys finally said that we were leaving, and the rest of them followed us. We was right, because within a matter of an hour or two hours or something, we went up to the ridge, and the fire swept through the rest of that canyon. Sounded just about like a runaway freight-train, and I'll tell, it was very spectacular. Then, at night, it comes down to the ground, and then at night we worked on it again. We were there a couple days, and—

I'm sorry, I'm cold and shivering. [laughs]

—and we were there a couple days. They asked us to walk out when they had other people walk in, so we'd be available to jump on other fires. I remember we walked out about—I don't know how many miles it was—but we had blisters on our feet when we got out, because we was in a hurry to get out, [laughs] naturally. We went back to our base camp, and of course, it wasn't long we did go on another fire.

Then I was on one other fire that ran away, that—I am not positive anymore—it could have been 3,000 or 4,000 acres. There was people there of all kinds. Us jumpers didn't stay too long on that fire either, but they had a regular kitchen set up and parachuted in all kinds of food and this kind of thing. Also, on that fire, I jumped, and I was very sick. They jumped us very low, because of winds, and I landed on a brush pile and laid there a while, getting all oriented and getting myself back together before we done anything. Other than that, I was usually was on what they call a normal smokejumper fire—an acre or something like that—close to a ridge. Them were the ones that I really enjoyed doing anyway. Two guys would go, and you'd have a fire that would be like an acre or something like that, and you could easily contain that. Then you'd have stay there, of course, until it was all out and that kind of thing.

[Audio speed slows]

KT: Are there any other fires that you can remember?

HW: Yes. I had one, what I thought was a very different experience. We had a fire, and two of us are going to go in the morning, and we flew across Payette Lake, which is the normal thing we do when we go to fires. We used to take along an apple or an orange or a roll of TP, and throw it out of the airplane and land it in the lake, so the lake would be calm in the morning. [laughs] Anyway, we go to this supposedly fire, and the fire's there and we jump and gather our stuff together and go over to the fire. I, right away, suspected that something isn't right here. It's a little different. This don't seem right. So we kept investigating, and finally realized and determined that sure enough, this is a hot springs, coming out of the side of the mountain

there and running into the stream into a couple dead trees and steaming upwards, which the lookouts had spotted as a fire. Just two of us jumped, and we made a big fuss about this. We couldn't believe this. I remember we got our canteens, and got hot sulfur water and coffee and made hot coffee just by dipping in the water and so forth. So we stayed there...Oh, we stayed there about a day-and-a-half, I think until a packer came. Took us over to the airport and went back to town. We measured it all off and reported it as a fire and everything. I'm not too sure but what the Forest Service man that jumped us that day...He perhaps realized it wasn't a fire, and thought this would be a good training exercise for us. So [laughs] we jump, and of course, all the other jumpers they made a lot of fuss about this, how us boys at Idaho, whenever we want a vacation, we go out and jump on a hot springs. We used to kind of joke about that for number of years, still sometimes.

Another time I had a real nice experience, I thought, we went on a fire, and, if I'm not mistaken, the Forest Service man was Lloyd Johnson (?). Like I stated about the other Forest Service people, he was a very, very good man in any respect. We went to the fire, and I don't know the details, but for some reason or other, it was a false alarm. So we started coming back to McCall, and of course, we were disappointed we didn't get to jump.

So, before we get to the airport, why, Johnson hollered back in the plane—it was the Travel Air—he said, “You guys want to jump?” Of course, we told him we did. He says, “Okay.”

So they started lining up the plane and everything and we get ready to jump, and I naturally thought we'd jump on the airport, like we had been a number of other times. When we really get right down to business to getting out of the airplane, why, I realized we were lined up to go across our bunk house and our loft and stuff, where our living quarters was, which is just right on the very outskirts of McCall. I thought twice, and I says, “Well, I guess, if Johnson thinks we can make it in there, I guess we're going to do it.” [laughs] It was in the evening, I believe, and very calm. So we jumped out of the airplane right above town, right above town, and drifted over to our living quarters over there. I probably landed 30 to 50 feet behind the loft where we hang our chutes up, and I thought that was really neat. Of course, I only done that once, I can assure you of that. [laughs]

KT: [laughs] Can you tell us about some of the people that you worked with?

HW: Well, it's been 40 years ago, 45 years ago, and it's really hard to remember a lot of detail. I remember a few people. Of course, there's always a few people stand out in your mind, but not too many of them. I remember the Forest Service man by the name of Ferguson (?), and Johnson, and Bill Yaegy (?) was our pilot.

Bill Yaegy also gave me my instructions for a solo license in a Piper Cub. Five years after I left from McCall for good, I found out and heard—something like five years, I'm not sure about the time—I heard that he got killed in plane crash flying, counting deer or elk or something in the winter time. I distinctly remember Yaegy. He was a nice guy, and there was two of us that took

flying lessons from him and flew. I remember the day I soloed, why, I was practicing landings, and I ground looped the airplane. He scolded me for that, which he should have I guess. We taxied back up to the hangar, and I thought he was probably going to ask me to get out of the airplane. Instead of that, he gets out the airplane, and he says, "Well if you're ever going to go by yourself, I guess this is when you're going to go."

So we went. He flew with us there both summers, and mostly we'd fly the Travel Air out of McCall, and once in a while the Trimotor would come when they need more of us than just a couple. As I remember, the Travel Air would hold like seven jumpers, and the Trimotor would hold more. I'm not sure about the number. It's been a long time ago.

KT: Yes. Did you—

HW: Pardon?

KT: Did you ever have any problems with the landing?

HW: I never did, because I'm a little over six foot, and I was young and weighed about 145, 150. I never had problems whatsoever landing. The only thing that ever happened to me was my lines were spiraled above my head one time, which holds your head down until you spiral on the un-wrap. I think I hung up in trees two times, fairly high that I had to let down on the rope. I remember one time I landed in a dead tree, and of course, ruined the parachute and I felt bad about that. Had to climb back up and do a lot of chopping to get the parachute loose from all the dead limbs and this kind of thing. But I never hurt myself on any fire that I jumped on. I never landed in any rock piles or anything like that. One thing that we always done, which maybe might seem a little different, they always took considerable time and it was very deliberate as to where you was going to jump and the wind and this kind of thing. Versus, some people may think, you just *zap*, you fly out there, and they throw you out and they leave. It wasn't that way at all. They'd do a lot of circling and looking at the ground and discuss with you where you're going to land and which direction you're in and all this kind of thing. So considering all that, it was really a lot easier than what, maybe, the average person would think. If you had to, you'd maybe jump maybe a mile or so away from the fire, if you had to, to get a good place to land. Of course, that would relate to the fact so you get down on one piece, so you could do something when you got down there, instead of climbing trees somewhere.

KT: Were there any injuries on the crew?

HW: At McCall, we were like 15, 20 boys there, and we never had more than sprained ankles. The bigger boys, like 180 and 190, they would end up sometimes having sprained ankles, but we never had any serious accident at our place at all I recall.

KT: Did you do project work during the winter?

HW: In the wintertime, here at Missoula or Idaho? No, in the wintertime, I would go back to Iowa.

KT: What kind of work would you do in the wintertime?

HW: In the wintertime, I was a project supervisor in Iowa, when I'd always go back there. One winter I supervised the garage area where we overhauled the Caterpillars—the dirt moving equipment, this kind of thing. When I was here as a jumper at McCall, I always worked on the road running heavy equipment—bulldozers or big dump trucks. I worked on the road between, I think, it was New Meadows, and Challis, and Stanley. At that time the road wasn't together. There was us people working on both ends. We were working on one end, and I don't know who was working on the other end. I usually done that when it wasn't my turn to jump. I worked, of course, with the Forest Service man there also. I don't recall his name, but he was in charge of the work and the blasting—the dynamiting. We'd run jackhammers and drill holes and load them with dynamite and blast them. Then I'd run the bulldozer, scraping off and leveling the gravel and this kind of thing.

I recall one day, when I was bulldozing, I seen...We'd drill, maybe, anywheres from 10 to 30 holes and wire all the holes together to shoot it in one shot. It's possible to miss a hole. So one day, there was two wires sticking out of the area there where I was traveling back and forth with the bulldozer. I went and got the blaster, and we hooked up the wires. Sure enough, it was a live one. It was a hole that we missed, and made a little crater about four foot wide and about a foot-and-a-half deep, right where I'd been traveling back and forth.

I don't remember his name, but he was also a real good guy to work with and I really enjoyed doing that. I'd always work up on the road, and when it would be my turn to jump, I'd go back to the camp. They'd have odd jobs—this and that, clean up and paint and little things to do—while you was there on standby for a fire. I've been back to McCall...I went back to McCall in '78 and in '83. If the weather's nice tomorrow, I may go back tomorrow. I'd like to go back tomorrow.

KT: How does McCall seem when you go back?

HW: McCall? Of course, it really changed a lot. I went over there in '83, and I went to the loft area there and spoke to somebody to somebody outside. I told this kid who I was, and he right away took me inside to one of the supervisors in there and right way they had a lot of conversation with me. We discussed everything and what they're doing and so forth and so on. I spent the whole afternoon there before I went on my way. I didn't stay overnight in McCall. When I was in McCall, during the days that I actually jumped, I was usually out in the woods somewhere working. I don't recall anything in regard to the town of McCall, let's say, versus us or them, or anything like that. I myself didn't go uptown very often. I'd go uptown once in a while, not very often.

In '83, when I was there, I went out to the airport—this was like 40 years later—and I had them give me a ride in a Piper Cub and circle around Payette Lake and McCall there a couple times. Of course, that was pretty nice memories.

KT: What do you think about the smokejumper unit today?

HW: Today? You mean, how they're doing it or what's happening and so forth? Well, first of all, I guess I'm kind of surprised they do the jumping they do at the extent they do. I guess, I would have thought by now they'd have other methods of doing the job, like helicopters and so forth. Just today, [Earl] Cooley was telling us a little as to why helicopters, maybe, don't work out real well doing the job. Yeah, they have a lot of different methods now, of course. They have different airplanes, and their chutes open easy, they tell me. They have different chutes so they don't jolt you. Basically, they're suited up and everything just like we did. From what I could see on the pictures—we viewed the National Geographic film—the training is very much the same. I think very much the same.

In '83, I went out to the airport, like I said, and I went out and looked at their training course and that kind of thing they had. They have the jump tower and very similar things that we had before. One young guy that was there, he showed me around, and I had a real nice visit with him. He'd been jumping two, three years, and he had a family and said he wants to be a ranger when he finishes his school and that kind of thing, so I really enjoyed that.

KT: How do you think your experiences as a smokejumper affected the rest of your life?

HW: My life?

KT: Yes.

HW: Well, of course, it really broadened my thinking, and my philosophy, probably, on a lot of things, because number one, of course, I lived with a lot of different people. Just being drafted, the experience itself, you live with a lot of different people with different ways of living, different religions and thinking, and this kind of thing. It definitely broadened my thinking in regard to life in general in that way. Of course, I learned all about the Northwest which I think is a beautiful area. I've traveled all over the Northwest, now, on a motorcycle two or three times, but I can't live here. I would if it'd be that easy. I'd like to. It was a very learning experience.

KT: How did everybody seem to get along at the camp?

HW: No problem. You mean us boys or—

KT: Yes, with the different beliefs, and the—

HW: I don't recall any problems. I don't recall any problems at all. I recall that there used to be...We'd have a lot of discussion about whether...A guy claimed to be an atheist or he was a Catholic or he was a Protestant or all this type of thing. In that respect, it was a very good experience for me in learning about other people and other religions and everything. It changed my ideas and my thinking a lot about religion in general and that kind of thing, but I don't believe we had any problems whatsoever that I know of.

KT: What kind of changes do you think that you noticed in your own beliefs?

HW: In myself?

KT: Yes.

[Break in audio]

HW: Well, I was born and raised, of course, within my own religion, and you don't learn about other religions until you associate with people and so forth. I don't believe that I ever was a person that was very narrow in regard to my thinking about religion. For example, I don't believe I ever felt that there's only one religion or one church house. I think I always felt that there is one God, and only one, and that everybody just happens to look at it different. But when it comes right down to the hard basics, it's all the same. I definitely feel that way now. I don't feel I have any feelings at all against other people with other religions, as long as they at all believe in God and his son and his teachings. Then, from there on down, there can be a lot of deviations. It doesn't bother me. It has to be every man's choice. When I was a jumper, or in CPS [Civilian Public Service] in general, I never found that a problem for myself or with other people. Of course, you always come across some people, maybe, that feel very narrow in their views about this kind of thing, but I don't believe I ever did. I think we each got to go our own way, and whatever we think is right. All in all, I still think I felt that I done the right thing.

KT: Looking back at your experiences in the CPS, what are your general feelings about the whole experience?

HW: CPS?

KT: Yes.

HW: Well, CPS is non-resistant. Okay? One thing I learned that was a hard fact to learn, I felt for me, was that we can be non-resistance and take the nonviolent attitude, but from the very beginning, you have to realize that you are not going to change the world or conquer the world, because of what you believe and therefore say that it's hopeless and I'm going to forget it. That's really not the answer. The answer also isn't that you're going to be non-resistant and solve the world's problems, but I firmly believe that if somebody isn't resistant, the world could just end up being in total chaos. The Scriptures talks about the salt of the earth, and it also talks

about the fact that if there is no salt of the earth, why, it's utter chaos. So, I think that somebody, somehow, someway in society, relative to any kind of things in society, somebody has to hold back and put the brakes on, because if you don't—if nobody holds the brakes on anything—you end up having chaos. Who's to do that? Well, I don't know.

I also don't have any animosity or negative or bad feelings about people that did go to the service and do opposite from what I did. I have very good friends that went to the service and were wounded badly. I have found that the only people that gave you any kind of static or kind of thing, in regard to whether you was a C.O. or whether you wasn't, were people that really didn't see any hard-time service. They were just, maybe, in a uniform and never went one out of States. I have encountered in conversation with a number of people that actually saw war as it is, and with them people, I never had any kind of problems in relating to them or talking to each other. So I'm not saying, exactly, what the answer is for the world, I just think everybody has to decide what the answer is for himself.

Another way I feel about it is that by going to the armed forces, I wouldn't have solved the world's problems, and by not going I didn't necessarily, either, solve the world's problems. Still, you have to make a choice which one you're going to do. By not having gone, I don't think I made the situation worse by not going. By not going, I done what I believe, what I felt was right to do. About dying; well, we're all going to die, and it don't make no difference whether you die today or tomorrow. The important thing is whether you're ready to die, and I don't believe I ever talked to a man that went to war and told me he enjoyed killing anybody and I talked to boys that did. So it's really a very difficult subject, I think, to really determine and put on the table and say what's black or white. It still just comes down to an individual has to do what he thinks he has to do. I could have went or I could have not went. I'll admit that it was after a while that I didn't go, that I firmly decided that I didn't want to go and that I shouldn't go. Along with that, I felt that being a smokejumper was part of the reason that I wasn't supposed to go—that I was supposed to do that.

KT: Why do you feel that?

HW: Pardon?

KT: Why do you feel that?

HW: I just feel I was supposed to do that. I just feel that was what my role in life was. I feel that what I did was a very worthwhile thing, and I'm glad I done it. I think that's what I was supposed to do, instead of going to the armed forces.

KT: Can you think of any other smokejumper stories that you can remember that you'd be willing to share with us?

HW: There are a lot of stories, of course, that I wasn't really a part of. One thing about my situation was, I feel, we were—and I think we was too—very much isolated in Idaho, instead of the camps that are around Missoula here. I felt at a lot of times that we didn't happen to be a part of some of the bigger things that happened with jumpers and so forth, because we were more so isolated from Missoula than like they were at Moose Creek and some of those other places. Of course, I've always heard all the stories about them and so forth.

What I would have liked to have done would have been to have spent like a week or a month at each one of those other camps. Where the boys jumped out of. That wasn't easy...I couldn't do that of course. The only thing I ever done was I came back to Missoula the second year for about ten days and took a ten-day refresher course, and I went back to McCall. So there again, I only learned to know about 20 guys real well over two summers, and some of them was only there with me one year. That was 45 years ago. Since we all come back to these reunions as bald-headed men, why, it's pretty hard to remember some of the things. [laughs] The first reunion I came to was in '78 —they had the first one in '73. I hustled for three days to get here and thinking about all the memories 35 years back, and I walked into the building right over there. I actually...It was late in the evening when there wasn't too much light. Momentarily, I thought, I'm in the wrong place, because everyone was 35 years older. Course, that's only a normal thing like high school reunions and everything else, but that just goes along with not being able to remember the people and so forth. I stood there in the doorway awhile, and they were all introducing each other. I did immediately pick on three guys that I knew, but we were all 35 years older, I'll tell you. Now, we're 45 years older. Yeah, it seems terribly far back in the distance, kind of like a dream.

KT: Are there any other comments that you'd like to make?

HW: Oh, I don't think so. [pauses] None other than, I think I was fortunate in doing it.

KT: I'd sure like to thank you for this interview.

[End of Interview]