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Interviewee: Rich McCrea

Interviewer: Clark Grant

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Rich McCrea: My name is Rich McCrea. I graduated in 1975.

Clark Grant: What was your job in the forest service?

RM: Well, I actually started out as a seasonal with the US Forest Service—temporary seasonal. Then I moved on to the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a forester and finished my career in forestry and wildland fire with them. I did a 32-year career and then I got out. I collected my retirement in 2009 and I've been consulting since then in wildland fire.

CG: Do you have thoughts on your experiences here, any notable memories? What do you have to say about the program here?

RM: Well, many fond memories of Missoula, of course, and just campus life and, you know (laughs), growing up in Missoula. As far as thoughts about the forestry program, I mean several courses were kind of my favorites. Dendrology, definitely a favorite course. It was always interesting, the dendro labs and hiking around Missoula in the neighborhoods and trying to identify trees that had been all hacked up with pruning shears and getting your hand lens out to figure out what kind of spruce it was. Dendrology, definitely favorite. Silviculture was my other favorite course. The most memorable part of silviculture was our two-week senior field trip. We basically toured up through Western Montana to Libby, came down through North Idaho, and then back to Missoula. Just a fun time, learning a lot. Beyond that, my forest measurements class—we did a lot of our field work at Lubrecht [Experimental Forest near Missoula, Montana] and it seemed like every time we went up there, it snowed half a foot or a foot. It was just a brutal, cold, cold winter. Always standing in the snow and trying to write things down. Slogging around—just trying to get around and getting vehicles stuck. That kind of thing, but it was fun.

CG: That's the life in the Forest Service?

RM: Yes. (laughs) Exactly.

CG: What sort of work did you do for the BIA?

RM: I started out as a forester. I got a position—it was actually a 5/7/9 forestry position for a professional forester. My first day on the job, I'll never forget, I walked in the doors at Rocky Boys Agency in Montana. I was Head Timber Sale Forester, and I was also the Fire Management Officer. The moment I walked in the door—busy job, oh my gosh. We did everything, you name

it. Small program, but way understaffed. So I did 32 years with them. The last ten years I did at the National Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, doing strictly wildland fire planning and coordination and budget, that kind of thing.

CG: Is there something in particular that draws you to public service in this way?

RM: Public service, especially in wildland fire, the government just about takes over your whole life. I mean, it seems like you're on call for six months out of the year. You get the midnight phone calls, "Hey, we got a smoke or a fire, and someone needs to go check it out." Dispatching crews to other people's fires, that kind of thing. The public service—to me it was always so challenging it made it fun. Of course, there was times it wasn't, you know, so fun, but there was never a dull moment. We were always busy. Always tons of work to do. I really enjoyed working with the Indian tribes. It was challenging in some ways, but in other ways I got to know a lot of tribal folks, a lot of Indian folks all over the West, actually. That was pretty neat. They treated me very, very well.

CG: I imagine after 32 years they'd gotten used to you.

RM: Yes. (laughs) Well I think they did, maybe. (laughs)

CG: Other fond memories of Missoula? You said, "Just growing up here," as though—I imagine most people who are at all familiar with Missoula can understand what you mean when you say, "Oh, you know, growing up in Missoula—" but are there other any particular instances you care to document?

RM: Well, the campus life and off campus life—I was a good student, but I could've been a better student, you know. I think we probably spent a few too many evenings in downtown Missoula buying 50 cent pitchers of beer (Laughs). It's a little more now, I realize. Just getting to know a lot of different students on campus and off and the campus life. Things were really simple. I'll never forget, we rented a house—me, myself, and four other students. The rent was 100 dollars per month. Even then that was like, "Really?" It was just cheap. We always had a freezer full of elk and deer. I don't know what tuition was back then, but we lived really cheap. We didn't have much money, anyway, to start with, but I just laugh about that, and think about what some of the students have to go through now trying to finance their education. Just the surroundings and the mountains and the beautiful campus.

CG: Is there anything you would wish to impart to forestry students who are going through the program today?

RM: When I got my degree, it was tough to get jobs. I'm sure that hasn't changed, but I hung in there. I really came to find out that I got a really good education here out of the School of Forestry. I was really, really happy with the quality of it. I mean, for the first few years until I got a permanent job, I was like, "Why did I get a forestry degree?" I hung in there and I never gave

up. I just kept floating the applications, which is a very painful process and that probably hasn't changed a bit. I got on the civil service rosters. I don't know if they even do those anymore. I kept floating applications and then, bingo. Everything just fell right in line. I just think the School of Forestry and the whole university served me well. You got to get that diploma. You got to pull the final slot and get that diploma, get it on the wall. That's the main thing.

CG: Was that hard for you?

RM: No, it really wasn't. I had a plan. I started school. I got through in four years. I thought I'd never finish. It was like, Oh my gosh. How many years is this going to go on? Then one day I'm filling out graduation papers and I'm like, "Wow. I got there." They hand me a diploma and the only thing I can think of was, I got to go to work. I worked summers all the time, but I was just the usual poor college student. I thought, I got my degree. I got to go out there, make some money, buy a real car, and that kind of thing. (laughs)

CG: You said you were retired now, but doing consulting. Do you get a chance to enjoy retirement?

RM: Yes I do. I'm trying to work half time is my goal. We bought a camp trailer—my wife and I—and we get out a lot. We go down to the Southwest—see the grandkids—a couple months out of the year. I think we travel probably about two weeks out of every month on the average. Not so much in the winter time. Most of it's just been out in the Western United States. We've been over to Europe one time, but there's so much to see just in the West and so many beautiful places. I like getting out in the mountains still and doing things.

CG: Do you remember why you chose forestry? Why did you want to be a forester?

RM: That's a good question. My dad, he was from Montana. Grew up in Toledo, Washington, and he was an avid outdoorsman. We went camping all the time in the summer. He was interested in forestry. He had a Master's degree here from the University of Montana in Education. We camped a lot and hunted a lot in Montana. He always talked trees and fire and animals. Of course, my dad went to school here, my sister went to school here, and I just said, "Well, I'm going to go where my dad went. What the heck?" (laughs) Forestry was just kind of—I wanted to be in natural resources. I thought, Well, there's the Forestry School and that's what I'm going to do.

CG: Is forestry, and especially back then, was it connected with logging primarily? Was that its main function?

RM: My first summer with the Forest Service, I worked as a technician. It was out of Pierce, Idaho. We had—I don't remember the exact number—there were probably 100 seasonal employees there. I bet virtually every one was connected with something to do with setting up logging sales. We had a ten-person road crew that did surveys. I was on a ten-person or eight-

person timber marking crew. It was very centered around timber operations, especially the U.S. Forest Service. When I went to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, not so much. We had some logging going on. It seemed like there was a little—I don't know what it was. I guess the tribes weren't quite so interested in cutting lots and lots of timber. Some of them might've been, but—

CG: Do you think nowadays the purpose of the Forest Service overall has shifted away from that? Or is it still a big part?

RM: I'll try to give the short answer. I think the Forest Service way overcut for years, not everywhere but in general. Too much logging. What really got them in trouble was logging very poor quality stands of trees that were very remote, where there really wasn't a lot of value coming out. You almost had to pay the loggers to build the road to get to the trees. The other values, like watershed, wildlife, wilderness, were so much higher. Yet they built roads into these places and logged them. It really got them in trouble, which it should have. Now the pendulum has kind of swung the other way. I think they're probably not doing as much management as they should, especially in the good quality sites where they've got road systems. It's the old pendulum swinging back and forth and I think it has gone way the other way now. In general, it's what I've seen.

CG: Any final thoughts?

RM: It's just a great school and I just really enjoyed my time here at the school. Working in forestry is always challenging—and fire.

CG: Oh, I had one more question as well.

RM: Okay.

CG: That is, if you ever were in danger on a fire. Did you ever have a close call?

RM: Oh yes. Yes, I think the worst is the falling trees and rolling rocks. I mean, I've been in situations and seen people in situations that were very close calls. I did a lot of fire team stuff. My position was a Fire Behavior Analyst and I still go out with the teams. That's really a safety oriented job and I've been on quite a few reviews where people have been trapped or killed even. It's tough, but challenging, again. It's a very challenging field.

CG: I guess that's part of the education, so that when you go out there, that sort of stuff doesn't happen.

RM: Exactly. Don't stop learning. (laughs) I don't care how old you are or where you're at.

[End of Interview]