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Oral History 422-042, 043

Interviewee: Ed Foss

Interviewer: Suzanne Vernon

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Suzanne Vernon: One time you told me a story about how you got to Montana. It was something to do with a pack trip.

Ed Foss: Yes. I think I had just learned (this wasn't my first pack trip) but I had just learned that you could get into wilderness areas with the American Forestry Association. I had gone to one in Colorado. I think that this was my second one. So I registered for the Bob Marshall trip, and arrived here when Buff and Dune Hultman were here. They took me in with a group. I had usually, on these trips, I had ridden and worked with the crew because I got tired of gun-wrapped, dropping humans. I felt I would learn more about the country and what people did. So... working with the crew. Only one packer in the bunch would not let me do this. He refused. The others seemed to welcome my help. On certain days, for instance, Buff Hultman said, "Today you'll ride with the dudes, Ed, because we are going to take a shortcut and you'll miss some nice scenery."

After the first trip with Buff I arranged for a trip with myself and a leader, a packer. We went in to the Bob and came out Smith Creek. Unpacked here. Right here. And we had come over in a rain storm with no view whatsoever. The only thing we saw that trip was the pond out back here. I thought, "Now, that would make a good homestead."

SV: Why did you think that, then?

EF: Simply because every place I went I looked for homesteads and imagined my living on them.

SV: You had a dream. . .

EF: Had a dream, yeah. Never really imagining that I would do it. That night we stopped at Liquid Louie's because we were cold. Stopped for one drink. I had no sooner hit the stool than somebody put a drink in front of me. I asked the bartender who the drink was from. He nodded at somebody across the bar who wasn't looking at me at the time. I just drank. Didn't say any thank you to anybody, turned around and left without buying anybody a drink. We had gone in for one. Had our horses waiting outside. They were tired and should be taken care of.

The next year, I went in with the same packer. Buff wasn't on either trip. We had two weeks in the Bob Marshall. And for the last week, the third week, Buff sent me into the Missions, which he never should have done. He didn't know the Missions. We didn't know the Missions. The Missions are not horse country. But it so happened that we got lost before we hit the Missions,

actually. We had a waterless camp and came back to Buff's the next day. I spent the last week with Buff and Dune, checking his fences and that sort of thing.

We went over west of the Swan River looking at some property Buff had there (Roll place) and when he went off to check the fence I just wandered around. When he came back I said, "Buff, I've found my home site." He said, "Fine, I'll sell you an acre." I said, "No you won't, Buff. I want more than an acre. You don't want to sell an acre here, anyway." That ended that sale.

At Christmas, I received a letter from Buff. He said "I think I have the home site that you want." He said that it was the place that we had landed and unpacked the year that we came over in a snowstorm. A blizzard. That's kind of tangled, isn't it?

The first year we had come over in a rain storm. The second year we'd come out of the Bob at the same place, Smith Creek Pass, in a blizzard. When we got down people asked us how much snow there was up there. So on and so forth. Both times we had to unpack right here.

SV: Both times, you couldn't see the country.

EF: I couldn't see any country at all, except the pothole out back. So, when Buff said he had this place for sale, what was the usual acreage? 160 unbroken acres. It had the best view of the Swans in the country, he said. And it did have a beautiful view. It's grown up a lot since then, and you don't get quite as good a view from the place. There are still places where you have panoramic views. I asked Buff if it had a view of the Missions. Neither he nor Dune knew. That's amazing.

SV: They must not have looked.

EF: It's an excellent view. So I actually bought the place sight unseen, when you come around to it.

SV: He must have told you that there was a building or two on the property?

EF: Yeah, I saw the old barn here. I saw the shed down there. I didn't know it at the time, part of it was falling in. That was Berger's original homestead. The shed was. What is a shed now, was his annex, his bedroom, as I understand, very, very cold. His original homestead, of which the shed is an annex, was sod-covered, and rotted and fallen in. Somebody had used it for--one of the tenants following Berger's death--had used it for a chicken coop. That's how I found it. No roof, chicken manure on it. The third building was a, had been a cabin, built by half-breed friends of the homesteader. That, the roof was shot on it. Every window in the place was broken. There had been an entryway which was narrow and built with slabs. There was a door, nailed across this opening. It had been put there because horses had been getting in and falling through the floor. I thought there was nothing to salvage. Dune Hultman was sure that it could be salvaged. We did that. That is what I call my bunkhouse, now. At the present time, we are

insulating it and making room for a chap—Ed Gish (Geese?)—who is going to have it rent free and he can do any work he wants to on the property. So he can sort of keep track of the old guy!

SV: That wouldn't be you . . . !

EF: Oh, not by any means! Keep track, stop in a couple times a day perhaps, and do any work that he wants to. This will, I think, ease a lot of so-called worried minds. Friends. You know what I mean? These friends, on one of my trips to St. Pat's—I don't know if you want this or not but I think it will amuse you—apparently I was on some medication that prompted a personality change. Friends apparently came to see me. And I was not normal mentally. I didn't ignore them, I acknowledged their presence, but I sat reading all the time they were here. This is their story. As far as I know I didn't have anything to read at that time. Then, another friend and her husband, appeared, and I was the same way with them. So they told the doctor that I wasn't normal. Sluggish in thinking, and so forth. So one night, an old man at least twenty years younger than I was, came crawling across some benches and asked if he could talk with me. And I said, "Sure." He started in, and I gathered what was going on was that he must be a psychiatrist. So I told him that I thought he would find what he was looking for in a book I had written. And I ran through a summary of the whole thing to him and so forth. He didn't ask many questions. He just sat there listening. I'm told that he went back to my doctor and said, "That is not a 92-year-old mind down there." That I liked.

SV: You needed to hear that.

EF: I didn't know at the time, that I was hurt, that friends would say I wasn't mentally normal. But they discontinued a couple of medications that I was on. Apparently I brightened up! It was a side effect of the medication, I guess.

SV: So you bought the property, sight unseen. Did you have any second thoughts about it?

EF: No. From this one pothole, I had seen enough to know that I wanted to live here. I had seen the mountains from the valley floor, but not on the day that we unpacked. I must admit that I had second thoughts when I actually saw the property, because it had been partially logged. It had been logged sensibly. I mean by that that they had left the ponderosa pine in islands and I found 11 potholes, either on the property or closely adjacent. Most of them were on the property. The islands of timbered property were fine. The deer were using the part of property that had been logged. I could see islands of work that I thought would keep me busy for at least twenty years, which at that time I thought would finish my life span.

SV: What year was that?

EF: 1965. I was 58 years old.

SV: It looked like a lot of work?

EF: It was. But it was so much fun. This house was built for me while I was still working. In fact, when I arrived, they were still working on it. The roof over the basement wasn't completed. I had my first meals in the fall, I still had to eat them with the burner turned on because it was cold. I wanted to keep the food warm. I didn't have any heat for about a month. The book tells it. We had a heavy snowfall which knocked out the power. The carpenters went home because they couldn't use their saws. Then I did wonder if I could be ready for winter. I had two horses and no hay. The chap who was going to furnish hay didn't have any and didn't let anybody know. Then I saw Dr. Pruyne who told me he had seen some fine hay the day before. It was near Greenough on a place where he had taken care of an animal. So I hauled my first hay from that place.

SV: Were the fences in very good shape? What did you do with your horses?

EF: Nothing. I started making, putting up barbed wire fences. I had one horse that continually ran away. So I had a heck of a time finding her.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

SV: I understand that Joe Berger tried to make quite a farm out of this, that he had tried to clear some land.

EF: He did. His garden space, I didn't find it out at the time, but his garden space, had a different kind of grass than the natural grass in the meadow. He'd had a lot of fruit trees planted. Only one of them is still alive. That one was half dead. Crab apple. But he did have pear trees and other things which I understand had died long before I got here.

SV: The old apple tree now might just be outliving its time?

EF: Ed told me that he had been out a couple days ago. There were many dead branches on the old apple tree which is two-trunked tree. One old trunk, Ed found to be rotted. He sawed off old branches. When he finished, he leaned on the old trunk and it fell off, rotten. The other trunk has been much more healthy this year than I've ever seen it. I don't know what will happen to it. We've only had one crop of apples in 33 years.

SV: Did you find any lilacs?

EF: Yes. I found three groups of lilacs in the meadow. They had been planted near the original home. They were badly diseased, I thought. Still, when I cut out the poor branches, they took life and bloomed heartily every summer since. I had brought lilacs with me which have been planted around here, around the old barn and the cabins. They've been doing well.

SV: How did you feel you were going to manage this place when you had that first look, looked at the logging. Did you start to develop a plan?

EF: I think it happened. I had a feeling of satisfaction in the knowledge that I couldn't ever possibly run out of work. That I couldn't live that long. You know, one person. There were the burn piles from the logging slash. The logging slash had been burned where they could be seen easily but there were still a couple of huge piles off where they couldn't be seen as easily. So I had the old piles to burn and new ones to make. There was litter all around where the horses had been tied and so forth. Old shoes and that type of litter.

SV: So you just went to work cleaning up, fencing?

EF: Yes. Plum Creek had done some logging west of me. I asked if I could have the trunks off their burn pile. They said yes, and if I needed more they had some to sell. That sounds like Plum Creek, doesn't it? Many of them were large enough so that I had to use the lift on the Jeep to get them up in place. Eventually we got the wooden fence completed around a huge area. The metal fence completely done. I didn't want the barbed wire to nick the deer. I found one doe who had tried to jump the fence and got her hind legs caught in between the two upper strands

of barbed wire and found her dead body in the spring. So I took down every bit of barbed wire I had.

106. SV: Do you remember the first time you saw elk here?

EF: Actually, the deer had put on such a show of play, that when I saw the elk, I was disappointed. Later on, when I got to know the elk better, that disappointment of course was gone. They did some playing by themselves. It was fun to watch, but it didn't seem to have the spontaneity of the deer play. See the break I had with the animals, actually, is that the property around me, much of it had been logged and there was nothing for the deer to eat, deer or elk, to eat, as yet. My place had the advantage of two or three years growth so they congregated here.

SV: Was there a season that the elk were here. . .I'm guessing that the deer were here most of the time. But was there a season that the elk were here more often?

EF: Yeah. I think the largest population of elk I've seen in the meadow, it was 18 to 20. And I don't see them every year.

SV: Did you see them in the spring?

EF: Yes.

SV: I bet you remember the first time you saw a grizzly bear?

EF: Actually, I do remember the time vividly. But I didn't know they were grizzly. One noon I came back with the mail and saw something in the meadow near the farm down there. This was in the fall. It was a sow and two cubs, I knew this. I sat on the rail fence, watching them. When Cal Tassinari drove in with two men from Reno. And Cal said, "What have you got?" And I said I think they are just black bear. Cal took the glasses and studied what I considered to be a long time. He said, "Those are grizzlies. Her hump is not large. You've got to get her in the right light before you see it. By her build, I'm sure she's a grizzly." After a lot of thinking, I decided I had seen this bear two years before in a different area of the property. The two youngsters which we had that year, were smaller and younger then. I watched her from across the pond. The youngsters are described in my book. I'm sure she was a grizzly, too. The same one. Golden in color. When they came back to the meadow three times that year, digging for tubers, which they eat before winter to add fat to their body. That time, the grizzlies were in the meadow, Picollo, my baby, spotted them the same time I did and started grazing down toward them. I wanted very much to call, and yet I thought, "If you do, you're not seeing nature as it is." So I let her graze. She slowly went down. When she reached the dried up shore of the pond, the bears ran up on the hill. The two cubs, which were quite large, ran into the timber. The sow stood on the opposite bank to which Pic was standing, watched Picollo, and slowly came back

into the pond. Picollo stayed there and was grazing while the sow continued digging the tubers. One of her children came back and grazed with her.

That year they came back three times. The second and third times the sow was digging in a different area and in the different light, I could see her small hump. The picture was unforgettable because the body was so sturdily built. And the color, light gold, unforgettable. I'm sure this is also the sow that my male samoyed spotted across the pothole down at the south border of the property. She stood up and I could see two full breasts and no youngsters with her. She looked mean.

EF: The first time I actually saw her I had been getting firewood and we sneaked away from the dog that was in the Jeep and here was this sow with two cubs. The cubs were just playing like mad. That, too, is described in the book. I didn't know at the time that was a grizzly. It was just this build that Cal described. Cuz you couldn't see the hump.

SV: In a different light, later, you could tell.

SV: Did you see bears every year.

EF: No. One time there was a seven-year interval when I didn't see bears on the property, at all. Maybe other places. This year I haven't seen bear. I have no garbage out.

SV: But they liked something in the meadow.

EF: I looked it up. I have forgotten the tubers which grizzly digs in the fall. Forgotten the name of it.

SV: You had a mountain lion right in your front yard, recently. Had you seen lions before that?

EF: That's the story in the book about the cat that was dropped off here? Mangy looking cat. My dogs were so upset, and dashed off. And she gave birth on the property, and the evening that I saw the babies—kittens—I hoped that the bear or something would get them at night! But they had been moved to the woodshed. One time when I had the mother cat treed, and knew where she was, the dogs created such a fuss. The kittens were on a ledge outside the barn. One time when I was walking, I had come out of the cabin and been going to dinner at the Berners. While I was in the shower the dogs were creating quite a fuss. I went out and I went out to the barn, calling the dogs. I thought they were just barking at the cat. When I stopped walking, the dogs came to me. A mountain lion jumped out after them and landed right at my feet! I can just picture that! Dogs running after the mountain lion and me running after the dogs.

I s'pose I did things that a normal individual wouldn't have done. But I don't know, it was fun. This mountain lion here, when it jumped out, it took one look at me and was gone in a flash. It wanted no part of me.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

SV: Can you tell me any more about Joe Berger, and when the logging was done here? (Berger was the homesteader.) Apparently Joe Berger didn't get out in the community too much, but he wasn't a recluse. He wasn't a trapper. He really was interested in farming, and apparently went somewhere else in the winters.

EF: I asked Evelyn Jette if anyone around here remembered Joe Berger. She said, "I think I know as much as anything about him." And she knew nothing, really.

SV: I did hear that he had a Victrola.

EF: Oh yeah. With a set of records.

SV: When he died those records disappeared.

EF: Yeah. I heard that John, um, well, Arlie Parks. I heard one time that Arlie Parks had the records. Arlie and I were not pals. He didn't speak to me for eight years, because he was coming in the old way, and I happened to be working along the road there at a sawmill site. He stopped, very friendly, and said that he had thought that he would never ever cut a tree on his place, but he found he was going to have to do it. And if the Forest Service would not let him cross their land to get the logs out, would it be all right for him to bring them through my property? And I was ready for him because I'd heard a couple comments he had made about me. So I said no, under no condition would I allow this. Told him that I had heard he was going to log. And I had heard it from somebody working in town at one of the county offices, which was a lie. And so he had been told to quit smoking, and this made him nervous. He took out his cigarette and added another coffin nail. But after that, he didn't speak to me for eight years. Then he got mad at Sherry Hearst because she wanted to transfer the original road from in front of her place to an old logging road that was farther away. And she walked this with John and with Arlie and his son John. He gave permission. So the next day Sherry got Barry Seaman to come and do the road. The next day in the mail Sherry receive a letter from Arlie Parks written on a lawyer's stationery and he said "Yes, it would be all right" for her to put in that road, providing she did this and that and the other thing, including crushed rock and that sort of thing. They came up the next weekend, they weren't staying here at the moment. So Arlie stopped speaking to Sherry, and started speaking to me. We were pals again. I told Sherry it had been eight years for me, so she said, "Well, I have only seven to go, then!"

John I got along with fine. But Arlie I didn't have much to do with. The story that I got out of that was that Arlie had bought that property from two doctors, did you know them? And that the families of the doctors, I think it was, said that they would take the logs and you can have the property. Whether that's true or not, I don't know.

EF: Has anybody mentioned the murders that have occurred here in the area?

SV: There has been mention of them, but most people don't want to talk about them. Which one are you thinking about? After you came here?

EF: No. They were both before. But I was just curious. The son of one of the men who was murdered is still living in the valley. He was a good friend of Mel Nelson's. Mel told me one time that this pal of his had never once mentioned the murder to him. That's why I thought it was going to be a very delicate thing if anything was ever written about it.

SV: The only thing I know that has ever been published were two or three articles in the Missoulian at the time. I haven't seen them. They are referenced in Audra Browman's card file at the University. She has done a lot of work. She is your age. She still lives in Missoula. For the past 50 years she has gathered information about the Swan. I think the date was in May, 1956. I would assume that if somebody wanted to find out about it, they could go back and find out about it. It was the Lundberg family.

EF: The other was at the Lodge. (Gordon Ranch) Supposedly this involved a husband and wife. Supposedly the doctor who took care of whoever it was that was shot. . . this was from Ting Wilhelm and could be dubious, because Ting had a great imagination. For his work, the doctor took the Holland Ranch.

SV: We'll be working with Tony Koessler on the history of the Gordon Ranch, so we might find out more about that.

EF: It's history. But you just sort of want to gloss over it as much as possible. I would think that would be the reaction.

SV: The interesting things I find out are that they didn't have law enforcement until recently. Did you have any in 1960?

EF: No, I don't think so.

SV: Murder, of course, everybody is aware of that. But there were so many other kinds of crime going on up here.

EF: No, I'm sure. . . wait a minute. I think when I first came the supposed law enforcement man was bringing the mail up. Do you know who I mean?

SV: Lyle Slade?

EF: That's who I mean. He was supposedly the enforcement man for the law. So I was told. But I remember Lyle Slade was. . . I got along with him fine. Not boozing pals, but we were friends. He would come into the Buckhorn. I never once saw him carry a mail sack, regardless of

whether there was much of anything in it or not. He would come in dragging this sack behind him. If anybody was parked in front of the door, I've seen Lyle sit out there and blow his horn until they moved out of his way so that he could go in there. I think the happiest moment I had as far as Lyle is concerned. . . somebody on the west side of the river had a huge dog. I forget who it was and the type of dog. But it was a big dog. I happened to be looking out the window one day when I saw the dog lift his leg and pee on Lyle's windshield. That just tickled the devil out of me, for some reason or other!

SV: Happiness in a small town?

EF: Oh yeah. It just made my day. I just wished that I had waited to see Lyle's expression if he had seen it.

SV: You were able to see Condon when it still had that innocence of kind of a backwoods community. In 1965, from the people I've talked to, it hadn't quite yet been developed. You talk about the Buckhorn, what was it like to you after moving from a larger city?

EF: It was, in the first place, Dolores Conkling, I liked very much.

[Story off-tape about Russ. Ed didn't respect him very much.]

SV: I want to get back to the property here. How did all this hummingbird research get started? Did the researchers come first and then you got involved, or was it the other way around?

EF: I had hummer feeders out and then the birds disappeared. I asked what had happened, and was told that the birds were eating natural foods now. Well, as far as I was concerned then came a year when there was no natural foods. The flowers had long since bloomed, and the birds still left the feeders. So I wrote to the group at Cornell and told them about the problem, to me it was a problem. I didn't think we had the true story. They referred me to a chap who was teaching in Tucson at the University. I wrote him and after a long time, got a hand-written letter back. I think it was both sides of two sheets of paper, hand written. It was from my now friend, out there. Bill Calder. So I invited him to stop by when he went to Colorado. He had told me in correspondence that he went there in the summer. I can still remember meeting him as he came out and he said, can't remember the term, it wasn't Shangri-la, but something like that, about the beauty of this place. I think that was the start of the intense banding here. Because he came yearly, he and his wife banded here on the property. Then they expanded to up above one year when we weren't so busy down here with the hummers. He found them up on the mountainside. Then Elly Jones of Swan Lake, when this chap didn't come for a couple of years because he had other things to do. Elly Jones came and banded on the property for a number of years. Banding had been going on elsewhere but never, as far as I know, in the Swan. He wanted me to start banding, but I just had a lot of work to do. I was doing some heavy hiking, which I loved. I just didn't want to handle these fragile birds. So I declined. It was just a

hint on his part that I start. Maybe I would have liked it very much. Elly was especially gentle with her birds. I did learn a lot about their route of migration and all that sort of thing.

I know one time in Buckhorn I had gone through some of what I'd learned. And (somebody) he was a packer, who lived down the road here. He stopped in up here and we were standing watching the hummingbirds. This was after I had carefully explained to his wife how they migrated and so forth. He said, "And they tell me that they go south tucked in the wings of duck or goose?" So, they obviously didn't want to know and I didn't correct them!

It was a good experience and Bill (Calder) has been a good friend and has sent me a lot of books on birds. The latest one I got was "Gathering of Angels" published by Cornell University. (Calder has a chapter or two in there.)

SV: Is that the only banding that has been done here, is hummingbird banding?

EF: Yeah.

SV: You have a lot of stories about ducks in your books, but no banding?

EF: No. See the fault of mine, the family of ducks would move to different ponds. My only proof that it would be a certain family, was the size of the family. No banding or anything. But to me, who was walking these distances between ponds, it was enough for my (journals and observations.)

SV: Have you seen sandhill cranes here?

EF: Not that I know of.

[End of Tape 2, Side A]

[Tape 2, Side B]

SV: When we were talking about the homestead property, if you could go back to 1965 and walk through it all over again, are there things you would do different?

EF: I might weaken on banding the hummingbirds! Although what I was doing was always so blooming fascinating I didn't see how I could get anything else in there. I went over the entire 200 acres cleaning up downfall and getting firewood, and that sort of thing. Using toboggans in the winter. Throwing the wood to where I could reach it with toboggans then hauling it by toboggans to icy ponds, then throwing it into a pile on the opposite side where I could reach it with a wheelbarrow, then taking it by wheelbarrow to the jeep, and then driving it home to the piles. So I really had the place in tip top shape. But you go back and you find new trees have died and fallen. But still it gave me great satisfaction, knowing that I had done the work. The feeling was that perhaps the place was a little better for my having passed through. You know that?

But I don't know, if I could go back to any part of my life, it would be this part here. You know how so many people fight retirement and so on and so forth. Did I ever tell you that story? Seems to me I sent a copy of a couple of magazine articles to the historical society. (Yes, he did. From Mayo Clinic newsletter.) Anyway, I think I have both of those magazines. They were Mayo magazines.

Retirement. When I went there as a young 'un, I was amazed at the way some of the oldsters acted when they were forced to retire at age 65, because of age. The more I thought of it, the sadder I thought it was. I didn't think their time should be extended. I just thought that they should prepare themselves for retirement. I felt that if you knew you were going to have to retire, there was no excuse for not picking up some hobbies, some other interests and so forth along the way. I just got so damned enthusiastic about it. I was the first one, I'm told, who retired from the clinic, because I had something I'd rather do, something I still had to do in my life. I'm sure I have these two magazines.

SV: When you were getting ready to publish your book, we talked about retirement a little bit.

EF: Mayo had more requests for copies of that article than any they had ever published. Not all of them were complimentary. It was not the response I had expected. Not from the "Practice until you die" school, they wouldn't be (complimentary). It was surprising, the number that were extremely interested. And oddly, after I retired because of other things I wanted to do, there were several other retirements. I apparently started them all!

In my life, which has been a good one, this has been the best period of all. Sure, I accomplished more when I was in practice and that sort of thing, but that isn't all that makes up life. You work for years and if you gain any medical fame, then it's cut off. And some of those boys just suffered because of it. One of the surgeons that I know would set in the Emeritus room with the

retired doctors, and say to a friend, "I still haven't had any letter that somebody wants me to do surgery in their place." And, the fellow who told me this, laughed about it. To me it wasn't a laughing matter, it was very sad, that he would expect, or want to (do surgery). But no, this has been. . .

It bothers me that some of the people don't appreciate what they've got here. And I don't think they do. And now this fancy of having a huge mansion for retirement is a shame. Who in the hell are they trying to impress? That is sad. Some of them are going to move. After all, this doesn't have what they expected.

I am pretty well walled off here.

SV: If a person did come to the Swan Valley today, and they bought an old homestead property, and they wanted to restore it, what kind of advice would you have?

EF: Be patient. Plan on working hard. Not judge your success by any elaborate buildings and so on, and so forth. I think that would cover it.

SV: How would you measure success?

EF: By the reactions of the people who had brought it about. Not by the change in the terrain. I mean, not by taking ponds and digging them out. That would be part of it but not to make a meadow where a meadow is not supposed to be. And that is being done. I think I would consider the life of the animals who are involved. Does it fit in its surroundings? Not, is there a big brick house? While brick houses are nice, I don't think they belong in this part of the country. I don't think it needs to be elaborate, it needs to be homey.

[End of Interview]