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Interviewee: Suzy Muldown Rondfeldt

Interviewer: Beth Hodder

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Beth Hodder: Hi, I'm Beth Hodder with the Northwest Montana Lookout Association. And I'm interviewing Suzy Muldown Rondfeldt about experiences that her parents had up on one of the lookouts in northwest Montana back in the early '40s. She was a baby at the time. So, her remembrances are brought to her by her parents. But I want to speak with her about what they've told her about her time up there as well. So, Suzy, if we can begin, maybe you could just tell me a little about yourself. Where did you grow up? And what was your relationship to the lookout?

Suzy Rondfeldt: I grew up in Whitefish. My mother had been born in Whitefish. Her parents came in 1905. And so a longtime family in Whitefish and I went through the school system in Whitefish and graduated in 1960. And then went off to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. I thought it was a huge town. But then I met my future husband there at college, and he was from California. So, we compromised. He was from Southern Cal. We compromised on the Bay Area, and I've been in Berkeley in this house for 50 years.

BH: And so, your parents, how did they meet? Your mother was from Whitefish. What about your father?

SR: My mother was in Whitefish and my father grew up in Minnesota, and went to Hamlin College. Two of his best friends from Hamlin had already come to Whitefish. John B. Simons, a local doctor, and Ralph Tate high school teacher, and my dad was a high school teacher. So, he came, followed them. He actually rented a room upstairs in my mother's house, when she was in grade school. My dad was a very liberal Democrat. My grandfather, my maternal grandfather, was a very conservative Republican, but they really got along well. Then as the years went by, my mother went away to college at Missoula, and my dad was teaching chemistry and physics at Whitefish High School, and coaching every sport, mainly football and basketball.

He began to start climbing up Big Mountain with some of the high school kids and fell in love. He was Norwegian, half Norwegian. So, the idea of really skiing up there was big. He and the local guys set up a cabin where there was spring water. And when my mother had to leave Missoula after two years because of the depression, the young business people would hike up-- my mother was working as the secretary to the division leader at the railroad. They would hike up on Friday night with torches, and go up to the cabin, and then hike up and ski Saturday, hike

up and ski Sunday, and in ski all the way down on Monday, I mean, on Sunday evening. The ministers in town didn't like that, because men and women were in the same cabin. So, they had to build a men's cabin and a women's cabin. Then my parents got engaged. And this is their engagement picture. I don't know if you can see it.

BH: Pull it up just a little bit. It's kind of hard to see but yeah. Oh, I saw that with the skis.

SR: They're on the mountain in the snow on skis.

BH: What were your parents' names?

SR: Betty Jennings Muldown and Lloyd. Most people call him "Mully" Muldown.

BH: So they got they got engaged up on Big Mountain. Was the cabin itself where Big Mountain the ski area is now or was it someplace just on Big Mountain?

SR: It's called the Hellroaring Ski Club, and it was over on the other side of Hellroaring Ski Run. The cabins were still there when I was a young grade school skier, but now they've been torn down because they didn't want people to be fooling around with the cabins. So it's just on the other side of the Hellroaring Ski Run, which is part of the mountain now.

BH: So, you probably spent time there yourself.

SR: Not in those cabins, but I spent every weekend on Big Mountain. I started to ski a year before it opened. When I was four, there was a little hill outside of town called Streets Hill, and my dad would take me there and teach me how to ski. And then when the mountain opened in forty-seven, I skied every weekend from the time it opened until I graduated from high school.

BH: Your parents got engaged, and what year did they get married?

SR: 1940.

BH: Okay. So then how did they end up going to the lookout?

SR: Well, my dad was a high school teacher, and his income was very limited. So for the rest of his life as a father, every summer he had to work. So they first decided to go to the Whitefish Lookout. I believe the advantage of the Whitefish Lookout was that there was a road in to the lookout. So my grandparents, my mother's parents, could come and bring groceries and laundry. And my mother did mention how hard it was to have a baby that had cloth diapers, and no flush toilet or anything to clean the diapers with.

BH: That probably was pretty much a chore. But then if your grandmother was bringing up groceries and laundry, could she take down the dirty diapers and all that? How far was the road in? And where did it go from?

SR: It went from the current Big Mountain road. In fact, the lookout was still there when I was in grade school because my Girl Scout troop hiked from the road outside of town up to the lookout one day for one of our hikes.

As I recall, the lookout was pretty high off the ground. It had at least three tiers of stairs. I do remember my mother saying how much work it was carrying a baby, and my grandparents couldn't bring the groceries up into the lookout. So, my mother and dad, but my mother mainly, would have to haul things up and down all those stairs, including the baby.

BH: Did they have anything like a backpack or a pulley system or anything to help them?

SR: Nope.

BH: That'd be pretty hard.

SR: And there were two dogs involved. Cleo, who was a huge Great Dane. Mini Bugs who was a little tiny, much loved, cocker spaniel who used to go skiing with them, running through the snow, hiking up. I don't know how they fit the two dogs and themselves and me in that little space. But they did.

BH: Well, they must have been looking forward to having a good time up there with all of the family.

SR: My mother was twenty-five at that time, and my dad was thirty-six and they talked about the lightning storms, because there were lightning rods on each corner of the building. And it was quite spectacular when there was a lightning storm.

BH: Did they see any strikes that might have taken off and turned into fires? Do you know?

SR: I don't know. I never was told anything about a fire.

BH: How did they prepare meals and that sort of thing?

SR: I had a picture at one time of the inside of the one room, but I don't remember at all what was there and I can't find the darn picture. These pictures are like two inches by one inch and I easily lost them over time.

BH: I can see how you could do that. Did your parents have any experiences in particular, that stuck out in their mind about their time up on the lookout, and what year was that?

SR: It was 1942. I was three months old. And the thing that I think stuck out was it was kind of an adventure for them. You know, they had been married two years, they had their first child,

and here they were stuck in one room with two dogs. I just think it was an adventure. They spoke rather positively about the whole thing.

BH: Did they have visitors come up there?

SR: Because they could drive right up to the base of the lookout. Yeah.

BH: So, they probably had a number of 'em which is unusual for that time, because so many of the lookouts at that time, either you couldn't drive to or it was a long, long, hard drive on horrible roads or whatever. So, they were pretty lucky, I guess.

SR: Well, this is, you know, right at the war years, right at the beginning of our involvement in the war, that spring. So there was a lot of young people who my dad taught in school, a lot of kids went off to fight in World War II from Whitefish. Lots of the ski group went off to fight in World War II.

BH: It must have been pretty hard for him to watch those people go.

SR: Well, he felt very guilty. And so two years later, he volunteered as a Red Cross person and went to the Pacific front.

BH: Where was he?

SR: In the Philippines and Japan, right at the end of the war. He felt very strongly if his students were going off to war, he needed to do his part.

BH: And was he there for two years in the war?

SR: I'm not really sure if it was a year or two years. It was at the end of the war. I do remember his stories about after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki going in to the places.

BH: And you mean to both towns? both cities?

SR: Yeah. By then, they had a second child.

My second summer was involved with lookouts but not in a lookout. I was up at Polebridge in a tent cabin. And my father would pack supplies in, especially I remember to Scotty Beaton's lookout, and he would go along Numa Ridge, and there were lots of grizzly bears. His way of dealing with grizzly bears--he's on a horse. He's pulling pack trains. His way of dealing was to bang pots and pans together.

He would always take pancakes and roll them up with cinnamon and sugar in them and stick 'em in his pocket so he could munch on 'em while he was going up. He really, really liked Scotty

Beaton and talked a lot about what a marvelous storyteller Scotty was. Meanwhile my mother and I were in the tent cabin. There was a little stove and I was walking by then and my mother kept saying, " Do not touch the stove. Do not touch the stove." And of course, I touched the stove. My hand got badly burned. They had to call down to Whitefish and Dr. Simons, their close friend said, " Just wrap it with lots of gauze, put Vaseline on it first and wrap it with lots of gauze and don't take it off." So, for weeks I had this gauze that Mom said got dirtier and dirtier and dirtier but she did not take it off. I have no problem with my hand.

BH: And you have no scars or anything.?

SR: Nothing. But that's all I remember about that summer was the trauma that I had caused by putting my hand on the stove.

BH: Now back to your parents' time at Whitefish Lookout. They must have had a cook stove and then a heating stove maybe separately from that, or were they one and the same?

SR: I have no idea and I don't have a clue how they got water.

BH: Yeah, I was gonna ask about that, too.

SR: I have no idea.

BH: So, there might have been a spring, there might not have been a spring. They might have had it brought up to them.

SR: Maybe that was something they had to haul up all those steps. I figured there were at least thirty steps, if not more. Well, I did see a picture of the lookout one time and it looked like just a small box almost. It had windows all the way around. Because they had to keep alert and looking. I imagine that it was pretty bright in that room all the time with a baby. Wanting to put the baby to sleep. I don't know how they did it. But my mother was quite young. You know, she was only twenty-five. And she handled it.

BH: Was there a catwalk that went around the lookout?

SR: Yes.

BH: Oh, that's right. Because you showed me a picture that had the dogs.

SR: Yeah, there was a catwalk.

BH: Was she as much of a lookout as your father? A lot of times it was the men who got the jobs and then the wives kind of filled in a little bit. Did they share duties?

SR: They shared duties. I think she got out more often than he though. I think she drove to town more often, visited with her parents. I think she got away more than he did.

BH: So they had a car that they drove themselves.

SR: They had a great car. They had a '39 Ford roadster that my dad bought in his bachelor days. It was a convertible. It had a leather interior and it had running boards and it had a rumble seat. He'd take my brother and I skiing and we'd sit in the rumble seat and it was a great car--a beauty. That was their car.

BH: What's your brother's name?

SR: Mike. He lives in Whitefish, Mike Muldown.

BH: What does he do?

SR: He's a realtor.

BH: Are your parents still alive?

SR: Oh, no. I am going to be eighty in a few months. No. They're gone. They're gone. My dad kept skiing through his eighty-fifth year. Oh, and he developed really bad osteoporosis because we're real small people, small boned, and so his bones started to break. My mother, unfortunately, very early in her sixty's began to have Alzheimers. She had Alzheimers for eighteen years. She died at eighty. But she was lost to us for eighteen years.

BH: That's pretty hard.

SR: I'm aiming to ski to my eighty-fifth year too, but I had a fall this year and have a compression fracture in my spine. So, I don't know. But I'm aiming for eighty-five.

BH: Back at Whitefish?

SR: I go there every year and ski now. And we had a place on the lake until this April. The whole family. My grandfather's lots. There are five of us, two cousins, my brother, sister, and I. I have a sister whose name is Margaret, and she lives in North Carolina. We had to sell; it was really sad because I've been going up there every summer until now.

BH: And so does your sister come back at all?

SR: No, not at all. She's much younger. She was born when I was in high school. She never had to live on a lookout. She led a whole different life than I did. She's like a generation behind me.

BH: Did you ever think that you might like to be a lookout after what your parents did?

SR: Once I got down to California, my husband is a devoted backpacker. We took our three children constantly on backpack trips. Up in Glacier we had several not great backpack trips because of encounters with bears. We did hike in to Sperry with the children when they were young. We hiked the long way from Gunsight and over. So, all of Yosemite I've hiked, backpacked, very outdoorsy and all of them ski. My life has been very much mountains. I love mountains. And my parents loved mountains.

BH: Did they ever consider going back as lookouts? Just that one year?

SR: Yeah. And then the one year up at Glacier. Then they had a second child and dad went overseas. And after that, he didn't work for the Park Service anymore. He painted houses in the summers.

BH: So, when did he retire? As a teacher?

SR: He became superintendent when I went to college, so that they could afford to send me to college. So, his salary went from \$5000 to \$8000. And then he had to retire at sixty-five, very reluctantly, it was when they kind of considered that was the cut off, and he was not ready to retire at all. So, he became a ski instructor up in the mountain.

BH: Now, you know, just back to the skiing. Your parents must have been among that very first group. Was there a group of them?

SR: Yes, they called themselves the Hellroaring Ski Club. It was a bunch of young working people. They were women and men. And he was definitely part of promoting Big Mountain. In '36, he took a boat to Europe and went to the '36 Olympics, the Hitler Olympics, so that he could go to Austria and learn how to make ski bindings. Then he came back and had the blacksmiths in Whitefish make ski bindings so that they could improve their skiing. And then after the World War when Ed Schenck and Mr. [George] Prentice came, a lot of the--what they call it--the mountain division of fighters. Go in the snow, the 99th.

BH: The 10th Mountain Division.

SR: Yeah. And many of them became the beginning. People started ski areas in Alta, Squaw Valley, different places, and my dad met up with Ed and Mr. Prentice. And they were very much involved in starting Big Mountain.

BH: Did your dad know Bob Frauson? He was the Chief Ranger in Glacier for years. And he was with the 10th Mountain Division. That's the only reason I was asking.

SR: He must have known him. I remember a family was living in Polebridge, a ranger and his family, and I can't remember they're very close to my parents. I don't know if their names might have been Robinsons, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure on that.

BH: Do you think if your parents had different choices, and they could have gone back to being lookouts, they would have, or circumstances took them away, and they lost interest?

SR: I think it was a romantic time for them, really. But by the time they had the second child and the war was just dominating their lives, that was not something that they even considered, lookout life. But that was, I think, a very special time in their lives because they were newlyweds and they had their first child and I always got the sense that it was kind of a romantic time for them. That space, no privacy, but anyway...

BH: I don't know if there's anything else that we need to cover because it's anything that you can think of that I've missed.

SR: Not that I can think of. I just think it's important that my father has gotten quite a bit of renown in the Whitefish area, in education and in the skiing. And I just think it's important that my mother be equally given credit for being on the lookout and for being part of the early ski crowd.

BH: I think that's very well appreciated.

SR: Thank you for interviewing me. I really appreciate it. And I wish I had been older so I had more to tell about lookout life.

BH: No, that's fine. You've done fine.

SR: I'll try and get these photographs enlarged and get them off to you.

BH: All right, great. And I will keep in touch with you so you know when this is going to be going to the University and that sort of thing.

SR: Thanks Beth.

BH: Thanks very much, Suzy.

SR: Bye. I have a feeling we would have been good friends.

BH: Well, next time you're in Whitefish. look me up, please.

SR: You live in whitefish?

BH: I live in West Glacier.

SR: I have West Glacier stories up the kazoo because my great uncle had a cabin camp there.

BH: That would be wonderful. Well, I can get you in touch with people up there too. We can all do it together.

SR: All right. Bye.