

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 447-001
Interviewee: Richard Wilson
Interviewer: Charles Palmer
Date of Interview: September 17, 2015

Charles Palmer: All right, so we're here with Richard Wilson. So when I first came you told me that you rookied in 1948.

Richard Wilson: '48, yeah. Jumped in '48 and '49.

CP: For those two years. So how was your rookie training, your rookie experience? What are your recollections from that year?

RW: Well, I recollect being quite scared when I got to the point where I was supposed to jump, and the only thing that scared me more than anything was not jumping and everybody kidding me about being too frightened to jump.

CP: Can I stop you for one second? I'm sorry, I didn't get that. That shows you my ignorance here.

All right, so here with Richard Wilson. So you're telling me you rookied in 1948, and what sticks out in your mind from that first year?

RW: Well, just that I was frightened to death when I got up to the door to jump, and that I was more scared of not jumping and being kidded about it, than I was of jumping, so I jumped.

CP: How many guys in your rookie class? Do you remember?

RW: No, not off-hand.

CP: No. Was it a big number or a smaller number?

RW: Well, I don't remember how many jumpers there were at that time. About half of them were new. I don't really remember.

CP: Ok. Then was it five jumps at that point, and then was that the full extent of your training?

RW: I think it was nine jumps. [pauses] It's a long time ago.

CP: It's a long time ago. What else sticks out from that first year?

RW: Well, the fact that I fought more ground fires than I did fires jumping into them. Only jumped into half a dozen.

CP: Oh, you had of “pounder” fires, then?

RW: Yeah.

CP: Ok. What else sticks out to you from that first year?

RW: Well, I was first on the jump list the day they jumped on the Mann Gulch fire.

CP: Ok, so that be in 1949, the next year.

RW: Yeah. August 5, 1949, I think. Fourth or fifth. I went in on a—flew in on a Travel Air, because I was first in the jump list. Two of us went on that flight on a Travel Air, and we came back in and it was a Friday, and the C-47 was taking off with jumpers for the Mann Gulch fire. We were cussing them out, because that would have been a weekend and overtime and all, and we were getting in too late to go on it. So we missed that. We thought we missed a weekend of overtime.

CP: Right. The perfect fire, right, right on your weekend.

RW: Yeah. But then we went in the next day to retrieve bodies. Or, actually, we went in the next day as a rescue mission, theoretically. And we packed from, I think it's the Missouri River, or from that river, we packed up to the top of the mountain about 150 pounds of first aid supplies, which we didn't need, we found out. But we packed them in, and we found out that everybody was dead. The only thing that we used was the sleeping bag. Didn't have body bags at the time, didn't have any canvas to wrap the bodies up with, so we slit open a sleeping bag to put bodies in. I remember the first one we picked up is badly burned, and had been in heavy fire area, and was burned badly and had split open and his intestines spilled out on the ground. I remember that because after we loaded the body, I was elected to pick up the intestines and pile them on top of the guy's body. That sticks with you. Wasn't anything pleasant to do.

CP: I can't imagine, yeah. I bet that sticks with you. So you jumped in? Or you came in from the bottom [unintelligible].

RW: We walked in.

CP: You walked in, ok.

RW: We flew in in a Ford to, what was it, Helena? And then the crew boss called into the hospital, because Bill Hellman [William Hellman] and somebody else was in the hospital but we

found out they'd died during the night. They'd arrived alive, but they died. Bill Hellman was also caught in hot air. He'd figured he was high enough above the flames to be safe, so he'd sat down and had a cigarette. Sat down on a rock, had a cigarette, and he was hit by the hot air there. We found where he'd run up the hill, tearing his burning clothes off—his cigarettes and everything. All his pocket stuff was scattered up the hill, and he did not inhale the breath—that breath of hot air. So he got up with the Wag Dodge [R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge] and was badly burned, and he spent the night begging Dodge to hit him with an axe, because it was very painful. And the first aid kits did not include morphine or anything like that. So it wasn't until Rumsey and Sallee [Walter Rumsey and Robert Sallee] went down to the river and flagged a boat down and got some help in there to bring those two guys out that they, I presume, got some doctors in there with morphine and other things that eased the pain on that. Yeah. [pauses] What else?

CP: So how many guys came in the next day then with you?

RW: I don't know. Somewhere around here is a photograph of all of them. Here they are packing body out. Nowadays you wouldn't have to do that, because helicopters can hover and pick the stretchers straight up, but in those days the helicopter wasn't Skookum enough to that. It could only hover in the ground effect. And so we had to pack the bodies up, you know, the shoulder straps on there—they bore a lot of the weight on the shoulders—extendable handles on the...It's a Stokes stretcher. And it'd have two guys packing it, and the guy on the down-wind side needed to get out after he couldn't hold his breath any longer, because burned bodies stink. They're terrible. Make you throw up.

CP: So that picture ended up in *Young Men and Fire*. How did that transpire? And you're credited, then, for the photograph in Maclean's [Norman Maclean] book.

RW: Yeah. It was the only one, and I had a lot of chances to have these things published. *Time* or *Look* magazine developed the film and wanted to print them, but they were interested in bodies. And I didn't think it was good for the families to just have those body pictures published, so I withdrew my authorization to publish. It would have meant a lot of money to me, because we earned a buck and a quarter an hour, and we got about 400 dollars for the year. I would have got 100 dollars a page for that magazine, and I would have gotten about 800 dollars out of that if they had published them, but I thought it would be too hard on the families.

CP: Yeah. So how did Maclean get ahold of that one, then?

RW: Well, I really don't remember. He got that picture, and they had published some other stuff. I didn't agree with him, and I wrote him a letter on some of the stuff that he published in that book, that I thought was erroneous. But I don't remember that much about that book.

CP: What prompted you to think, I need to take some pictures of this? Were there other guys who snapped pictures, or were you kind of—

RW: I had a little 828 camera, which has a heat exposure roll hole and a couple rolls of film. I had that camera because it fit inside the collar of the jump chute, and I could take it on parachute jumps. I just happened to have it along with me and thought to photographs of this. I don't know why, particularly, but I did.

CP: Just felt like something you should probably do.

RW: Yeah. They dropped in lunches into us. I think that that guy there is the original forester. Of course, when you have a tragedy like this, the top dogs get involved in it. They dropped us water, but not enough for wash, and they dropped good lunches. But you'll see in another photograph here—I don't know whether I can find it—there's a plane, Trimotor, dropping them. [Pauses to click through photographs on computer] A lot of duplicates. There's no sequence to these photographs. There's a couple of deer that had survived, and they weren't afraid of us, so I guess they were in shock. I don't know. And these are bread and meat from our lunches that [unintelligible] throughout there. You bring your hands close to your face, you'd smell that dead meat and it'd turn your stomach. Couldn't stand to eat so you just put the cheese and meat and bread out there. And you will notice in all these photographs that there's no hard hats.

CP: And these are some of the guys then that came in with you that next day?

RW: Yeah. [continues to click through photographs]

CP: Ok [pauses]. How about this picture, what's that? I mean obviously it's a plane wing and—

RW: Looks like a C-47 wing, which is not the plane that we were flying in. There's still smoke coming up. That's where the crew has finished and is heading back down to the Missouri River. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine in that picture plus me. At least ten.

CP: So the day is over at that point, and you are heading back down the hill?

RW: Yeah. There's the helicopter. You'll notice that it's got wheels on it. Only a partial canopy. It just didn't have the strength to lift anything off the ground. It could lift one body plus the pilot. That was it. And it could hover on flat land. We had to pack the bodies up to the ridgetop because they could only land on the flat land. Then it would take off and tilt forward and go forward and drop out of sight and come out about 500 feet lower, and finally gathered flying speed it by that time.

CP: Yes, and that was Jack Hughes apparently was the name of the pilot. An article came out about his trips into Mann Gulch that day about a month or so ago in the Billings Gazette.

RW: Sorry there is so many duplicates.

CP: No. And so you guys would bring a body down one at a time then and have to load it onto the helicopter?

RW: We'd bring it up to the ridge, yeah.

CP: Bring it up to the ridge, ok. So he was up on top. What are your recollections from that process of having to do that 13 times?

RW: Well, just that it's a lot of work and the bodies smelled terrible, and so if you are on the downwind side of it, you hold your breath as long as you can and then you duck out and somebody else take over that end of the stretcher. Finally get it out.

CP: It just had to be amazingly difficult to—I mean these were your brothers, right? These were the guys that you worked with on a daily basis, or did you just try and filter that out?

RW: Well, a few of them I knew. One of them was a hiking buddy of mine, but the rest of them I just knew casually from seeing them on the job.

Here's a buck that didn't make it. A pretty good sized buck. [continues to click through photographs] There's Phil McVey [Phillip McVey] again. [pauses] Ford Trimotor. [pauses] Travel Air. There's the group packing one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. There's me, and there's Wag Dodge. Wag Dodge was another casualty event of that fire. He died at age 35 of stomach cancer as I recall, and I think that even though he did everything that he could possibly do to save those guys he had to feel guilty about having lost his crew. I suspect he worried about it you know, and that's something that helps cause cancer. Notice no hardhats in that film either.

CP: No. Did Rumsey or Sallee, did they help then the next day as well, or had they kind of—

RW: Well, they went down to get help, so they were out. Never met them. There's the barracks we had that was a Civilian Conservation Corps barracks that was left over that...[pauses] There's one other picture of a body, the last body that we had or found. We walked by several times, and then we caught a whiff of it and found somebody that was probably 160 or 70 pounds and it had burned down to about 50 pounds of overcooked meat. We didn't have any idea why because there was no heavy fuel around there. He was just laying in kind of an open area with nothing but grass around him and a couple of trees, but they weren't burned. It wasn't until later that we ever heard of spontaneous human combustion, but that might have been what it

was. Made him burn so there was just [unintelligible] of his legs left. Legs and arms, but we didn't recognize it as a body for—we walked by it a dozen times looking for it, but didn't see it. I don't know whether I can show you photos on this any better or not. [long pause]

That's the Trimotor dropping.

CP: Dropping supplies to you while you were up there that day?

RW: Yeah.

CP: Ok. [long pause] A great picture.

[long pause]

RW: Regional forester. [long pause; clicks through more photos]

Well, you're not interested in that. That's my wife.

CP: So some of these are taken from a different fire then, is that what you are thinking? Like of the C-47 wing and the—

RW: Yeah, must have been.

CP: Just other pictures that were on that roll of film?

RW: Yeah.

CP: Ok.

[long pause]

RW: A lot of duplicates.

CP: How about that one? What's that?

RW: That is just inside of an airplane looking at guys inside, poorly exposed. [long pause; continues to click through photos]

Well, that's sum total of the photos, I guess.

CP: Yeah, so that must have taken a good chunk of the day then to go in and have to do that.

RW: Two days.

CP: Two days? So the picture where you are headed down the hill then you—

RW: Second day. They let us go out to a gas station where we washed up and then went in and they fed us a good dinner. So I don't think any of us ate on the ground there. That stuff glues to your face. You couldn't stomach anything to eat.

CP: Yes, so they took you into Helena then, and you got something to eat?

RW: I guess so.

CP: Yeah, and then came back the next day.

RW: No, that was after we came out.

CP: Ok, so you were in on the recovery for two days?

RW: Yeah.

CP: Ok. Did you stay up on the hill then the first night?

RW: Oh, yeah.

CP: Yeah, ok.

RW: Yeah, that's about it.

CP: Yeah. Well, that just had to be really difficult to deal with.

RW: Well it's something that you always remember, and it's something that affected my firefighting career. I was on a lot of fires after that. Several hundred of them as a matter of fact, and I was always cognizant of the people who die on fires, so that when I was in Southern California they wanted to make me a fire boss too, or something like that. I didn't want to have that responsibility, so I was cooperator coordinator and a logistics coordinator, and my main job was to go out with state fire people and county fire people, and we'd look at subdivisions and we'd figure out whether we wanted to put a crew in or not. And if I couldn't see a safety zone and an escape route, we didn't put a crew in. I burn homes up far easier than I burn people up. But we, on the average, lost one person every other year on fires down there, and when I was there we didn't lose anybody but we lost a lot of homes.

In [unintelligible] when they were subdividing—had subdivisions for approval—they'd have them at the top of gulches that were full of brush. They'd build a road across the bottom and a cul-de-sac at the end of it, and they'd tell everybody that that was a fire line for a break with 20 feet of pavement and then a little setback and then the house. Say a 1,100-degree temperature hitting the windows would break the windows and then burn the house down. There wasn't any question on that, and we testified that we' weren't going to put any firefighters into that cul-de-sac in there because that would be a death trap. But the committee that was approving the subdivision was made up of developers and subdividers, and they would always approve their buddy's subdivision. So that when we got there to those places, we'd let them burn.

CP: Still happens today down there.

RW: Well, I would hope so. Better than putting a crew in there, and then going to pick the bodies up.

CP: Yes, absolutely. Yeah.

RW: First priority is to save human life, the second priority is the buildings and that sort of thing, and the lowest priority is really the natural resources.

CP: Yeah. So I just want to make sure that I am clear and tracking you. So on that day on August 5, there had been a fire call that came in and so you went out in the Travel Air then, is that what happened?

RW: Yeah.

CP: Ok, and only a few of the guys in the load jumped, or you ended up—

RW: Well, we didn't jump at all.

CP: You didn't jump at all.

RW: We came back and landed at Missoula Airport when the C-47 was taking off, and we were cussing them out because we couldn't go.

CP: Yeah. It was too windy on the fire that you flew or just—

RW: No, we never found it.

CP: You never found it. Ok.

RW: It was reported by a lookout, but we didn't find any fire.

CP: Otherwise you would have been on the on the C-47 load.

RW: Yeah, yeah.

CP: Is that something you ever spent much time just thinking about, about this simple twist of fate or whatever it is, or do you just say, you know what, that is what it is and I got to move on.

RW: That is what it is. That's the way it was, thank goodness.

CP: Yeah, because I know your daughter joked that if that hadn't happened she wouldn't have been around because you wouldn't have been around.

RW: That's right.

CP: So it is just not something that you really spend a whole lot of time thinking about. Is that fair or—

RW: Try not to think about it, but you remember it and it sticks with you when you're on a fire. And I was on enough fires—hot fires—that I thought about it quite a little bit there.

CP: Yeah. How long was your fire career then? What did you—

RW: Well, I spent 15 years in California, and I was in a lot of fires in there. I was in fires in Oregon and Idaho, Montana as well, and in Arizona—all around—even in Alaska, but many in California. They had a lot of fires.

CP: Did you stay with the Forest Service then as a career, or did you move onto something else?

RW: No, I was with the Forest Service.

CP: Ok, and then as a—so you jumped for two years, then what was the smokejumping experience for you? What did you take for it? A lot of guys say that it's the best job I ever had, you know. What is your take home from two years of jumping?

RW: Well, it was a good experience except for Mann Gulch, and I appreciated it. The first year I had to be a lookout fireman because I didn't have the forest firefighting experience to qualify as a smokejumper, so that was the end of my freshman year. Then my sophomore and junior year I was a smokejumper, and then I graduated from college and went into the Forest Service, and so wasn't any more smoke jumping.

CP: Yeah. Did you ever have a job you liked more, or did you miss it when you left?

RW: Well, I always enjoyed working for the Forest Service. I liked my career. I had a good time. Had a good partner in life. When I was a junior in college, I was looking for a partner in life, and I found her on a climb up Flattop Mountain. It's an 11,000-foot high ridge really in Rocky Mountain National Park, and about halfway up she was sitting on a rock taking a break. I sat down next to her and got talking and found out that she liked the out-of-doors and liked to hike and that sort of thing, and I was looking for somebody that had the physical stamina to hike and backpack and liked the out-of-doors, so she fit my needs really well.

CP: There she was?

RW: She stuck with me for 56 and a half years, and then she took advantage of that opt-out clause in the marriage vows, until death do us part. She copped out at that time.

CP: I'm sorry to hear that.

RW: Yes. [pauses]

CP: What else would you like to share?

RW: What?

CP: What else would you like to share?

RW: Well, I can't think of anything right now.

CP: Okay.

RW: I served with the Forest Service in Montana, with the smokejumpers in Oregon, as a full-time employee in Alaska. Then my wife caught polio in Ketchikan in 1955 and we had to move down to San Leandro where she could get rehabilitation services. That's where we spent the next 15 years in California, and then came up the time when I had the chance to be promoted to forest supervisor of the Inyo to take over Bill Wurst's (?) job as wilderness manager in Washington...or both of them were promotions, or take a lateral to Ketchikan as forest supervisor. I took the lateral to Ketchikan because both Doris and I liked Alaska, and we've been up here ever since. That was 1970 move back. Move from Ketchikan to here in '75. Lived here for 41 years now, I guess. So I guess I'm a fairly long-term resident.

CP: [laughs] Yes, getting on that. Well, I sure appreciate you taking the time. It's an amazing story.

RW: Would you like to have this little disk of pictures?

CP: Absolutely.

RW: If I can close this down and... [long pause] We don't have the end for this so I'll put it in an envelope.

CP: Well, I don't want to take your thumb drive from you. Let me send that back to you. Is that okay?

RW: No, that's fine.

CP: Okay.

RW: It isn't mine anyway. I borrowed it from my daughter. I actually mailed some of those to you. I emailed them to you.

CP: You did. Yes, about six, or there's a couple duplicates, but I think there was about seven of them that came through, but there was some on there that were not on the...that I did not get earlier so I appreciate that. And then if you—and it's totally up to you again—if you would want those to be a part of the collection at the library [Mansfield Library's Archives and Special Collections] and they have a different form for that. The interview is one. If you want those pictures to become part of their collection—

RW: That'd be good.

CP: I think so. I think it'd be...So then we got to do...We'll worry about that at the end though, how about that?

RW: Does my story relate to what other stories you have heard pretty well or—

CP: Well, I just came on as the historian here at the start of this month, so I'm brand new to the position.

RW: It would be nicer if we had Rumsey and Sallee in here at the same time talk about it because they would have seen things from a different perspective.

CP: Wouldn't that be amazing.

RW: Yeah. They're both dead, I guess.

CP: Yeah. Yeah, that would be...I met Sallee at the one of the reunions but didn't get the chance to talk with him any about specifics or anything.

[pause]

RW: What else can I help you with? Somewhere I got the negatives for this, but I haven't had the chance to look them up.

CP: Okay.

RW: I will look them up. You are welcome to those.

CP: If you were to ever find those I know the library...I know the archivist there would—

RW: Stuff I got on the computer's good enough for me.

CP: Yeah, right. The library folks would love the negatives I know that much just from talking with—

RW: All scratched up.

CP: But then they can do whatever they need to do with them and at least have that. Have that record.

Yeah, so Maclean. Did you ever have any face-to-face conversations with him the, or it was just somehow he got ahold of one of the pictures and you didn't agree with some of the things that he wrote in the book and—

RW: Yeah, that's about the only conversation we had. I got the book over there. I don't remember what I disagreed with, but that's a minor point.

CP: Yeah, yeah. Nothing that sticks out for you as far as that's flat-out wrong or anything like that?

RW: No.

CP: But then he referenced you as far as being the owner of the photograph.

RW: Yeah. Yeah, I like to be credited for the photographs.

CP: Oh, absolutely.

RW: If you print them.

CP: Yeah, you took them. Yeah.

RW: Yeah.

CP: Well, I sure appreciate this. I just can't thank you enough for you time.

RW: Do I have your mailing address? If I find those negatives, I'll mail them to you.

CP: I will give you that.

[long pause]

RW: Here's a—

CP: Oh, thank you.

[long pause]

RW: Well, every once in a while the smokejumpers talk about the merits of whether they should have women in as smokejumpers, and I mean to write back to them sometime to point out the first woman to jump on a fire did so in 1937 and that was in Russia. But it was three years before any man jumped on a fire in the United States, and they've proven their worth long ago. That's [unintelligible] women, of course, but then not all men want to be smokejumpers either.

CP: Yeah. How did you hear about that?

RW: Oh, just reading stuff here and there.

CP: Yeah. I'd never heard that. That's interesting. [pauses] Yeah, I jumped with some very, very capable women, I tell you that.

[End of interview]