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Interviewee: Bill Fordyce

Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Kjell Petersen

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Kjell Petersen: I'm going to start out by saying welcome all lookout friends. My name is Kjell Petersen. I'm with the Northwest Montana Lookout Association. And we're joined today by Beth Hodder. She is the manager for the Oral History Project with the lookout association. She also works closely with the ScholarWorks Program at the University of Montana, where all our interviews are stored and available to the public. We have heard back from them that of all the different interviews that have been done and stored there, the interviews with lookouts have received some of the most visits. That includes not only around the United States, but across the world. So, we're kind of thrilled about that.

And you'll also see on the screen here the person that we're here to interview today. Welcome Bill Fordyce. Bill has staffed about six lookouts in the past 11 years, so he's got a tremendous history of stories that he's going to share with us, and I've heard some of them already. I think it's going to be really entertaining. Beth, I want to just iterate that anytime you feel the need to pop in and ask an additional question or provide input, you're welcome to do so.

Okay, so let's get started. Bill. First question. Tell us about your childhood, where you grew up, what kind of environment you were in.

Bill Fordyce: Okay, well, I was born in St. Louis. Then at nine months moved to Sheridan, Wyoming. And I was there for a few years. I think that's where--you know--there's a question that said, "how did you get into the outdoors," I think that's where it all started. My folks during that time had a dude ranch up in the Bighorns, and I was just turned free as a kid. Alls I had to do was show up at supper time. So, I was all over the place. And I think that I've been in that spot ever since. Yeah, all over the place. And, you know, loving being outdoors. I'm really happiest outdoors. Then my folks moved back to St. Louis, and I had a hard time living in the city and I did all through high school, and then I kind of had control of my own life, and I've been out and about ever since.

KP: So, what possessed you to move out West?

BF: When we were kids, we lived outside of Sheridan, you know, the West is the best. That's where the big grand landscapes are. Here where I am currently up in Polebridge, this is where all the big predators are still here. And few people and it's very peaceful.

KP: Nice. So how did you end up becoming a lookout? Did you know somebody who was a lookout, or did you just stumble on the idea?

BF: I absolutely stumbled. I had this friend that was working in Helena, an old hiking buddy. One day we were talking on the phone and I was living down in the Ozarks at the time in the southern Missouri Ozarks. We were talking and he said, "Oh, I went to this great presentation last night. It was on a fire and it was given by this woman, this fire lookout" and I went "whoa, a wilderness fire lookout." I didn't exactly know what it was, but I really wanted it. And so, I said, "Hey, get her phone number and email address," and he tracked her down and got it. That was {Samsara} Chapman-Duffy. She was at Patrol [Lookout] over there on the Lewis and Clark [National Forest] out of Augusta/Choteau. And at the end of the season, I got in touch with her in October; we talked a little bit. And I asked a bunch of questions, you know, like, how do you get your food? How do you cook? How do you keep your food? Blah, blah, blah, how do you do this? And she answered all my questions. Then she suggested that I read a book. She gave me a title and said, call back afterwards. So, I read the book. I can't remember the name of it, I think it was *Mountains of Memories*, or *Memories of Mountains*. I read it, and then I called her back with a whole list of questions. More on how do you take care of yourself up there? The whole thing with water? How do you take a shower? How do you clean up? What kind of meals did you cook, and then how do you apply? So, she gave me a good idea and gave me her boss's name, which was Russ Owen.

I called Russ and talked with him for a while. He gave me a little bit more about how to apply. Then he said, the job will open up January 1, and it will be open for a week, so you have to apply during this time. And this was in November when we were talking. I went to USA Jobs and I created my profile. And I thought I did a pretty good job of it. So about 10 o'clock in the morning, January 1, I got in there, and I clicked--bingo--pressed the button that applied to a bunch of places. Of course, I had no experience. I had never been in a lookout before, and I really didn't like heights, [laughs], but I wanted to do this. Then I called Russ and told him, "Hey, I've done this." He says, "I don't have any openings right now, but we'll see. Call me mid-March." Well, I called him in mid-March, and I hadn't even made the referral list. So I was, so well, what do you do? And I said, "Well, geez, Russ, keep me in mind. I really want to do this. And I think I'd really be good." I had lots of wilderness experience, lots of just everything, working with radios, running whitewater races and junk like that, or helping run them. So that was that.

That was March 2009. And I said keep me in mind. Well, It's the last weekend in May, same year, 2009. I'm driving and I get this email from Russ that says "I might have an opening. Are you still interested?" Well, I immediately sent him an email. "Yes, I'm still interested" and then immediately called him. And he said, "Well, here's the deal, Beartop Lookout. The lookout who has been there for three years is going to find out on Wednesday {this is a Monday} if she gets into grad school. I want to lookout for the whole summer. I don't want one first half and then the second half. And he said, "Could you do it?" I said "Count me in. Count me in."

So, Wednesday afternoon comes around and he says you got the job. This is the last Wednesday in May. And I said great. You know, not thinking about anything. When can you be here?"

"I said, "When do you want me?"

"How about Monday? June first."

I'm in the southern part of the Midwest, so I said okay, because you know, I really wanted to do this and it took a lot to get out of town. I had to find somebody to do things, and then of course I visited my mom who was living in an assisted living place, and said goodbye to her on Friday, because I was driving and got a promise from her that she would still be alive when I came back. She was like 96. And she laughed and said, "Oh, sure, I'm going for 100." And I said, okay, so I left. She lived in St. Louis. I left St. Louis, in rush hour traffic--four or five lanes of bumper-to-bumper stuff.

As I got on the highway an ambulance went by and so shoot, I got right on the tail of that ambulance. And we blasted out of the city and then kept going. And that ambulance got me about thirty miles west of the city before they got off. And then I was on my way. I pretty much drove nonstop to get here so that I could start work on Monday. I showed up Sunday afternoon in Augusta and called Russ and said, "I'm here. Where's the office you want me to be at tomorrow?"

And he said, "Something came up; you'll get tomorrow off." So I called that guy from Helena. And he met and me we went for a long hike.

Beartop Lookout is in the Bob Marshall [Wilderness] on the east side, thirty or so miles west of Choteau. And the only way you can get to it--you can walk or horseback. That first week I did a bunch of little training things. My background is in woodworking, carpentry, historical preservation stuff. That's why I think Russ hired me because that lookout needed a new roof. We spent that first week doing some training, making sure my first aid cards were up to date, plus a little historical preservation stuff so that we would do this roof correctly. Then he sent us on a ten-day hitch into the wilderness {Samsara}, Patrol Lookout, Isan Brant on Prairie Reef Lookout, myself and the horse packer. The idea was just cut the trail open to Beartop and just get to know each other. So, we did that. And then came out and had a weekend and then packed up.

The four of us went in plus Russ, and we went up to Beartop. We spent the next ten days ripping the roof off and putting a new roof on, historically correct. The shingles had all been packed in the year before. Then on June 22 everybody said goodbye. And they left and left me at Beartop Lookout. I had had no training, zero.

KP: Two things I want to mention. First of all, Samsara is kind of a legend in the national organization, so I'm glad you brought her up. And secondly, your arrival out here is a prime example of sometimes the universe takes over and takes care of us when we don't have a freaking idea what we're doing, right?

BF: [Laughs] Absolutely. So, I'm in this lookout, and they're getting ready to leave me for the summer, you know, and this one has a reputation of getting twenty, twenty-five visitors a season. You get resupplied every two to three weeks, three to four weeks, however, it works out by horseback. And I say to Russ, "Hey, you know, I really don't know what I'm doing. But I can talk on the radio." He says, "Look around, Bill, we're in Beartop. There's lots of literature here and there's a thing for the Osborn Firefinder. You appear to be a smart fellow. I'm sure you'll figure it out." And off he goes. So, there I am. And of course, I am reasonably smart. And I did figure out some of it. But I'm hard of hearing, and one of the things that I did not realize the whole season was the weather is broadcast at 1000 and 1400. And you listen to it, and you write it down, because I didn't have a smartphone. And you know, they say chance of wetting rain 10 percent or less than 10 percent, or whatever it is. And I honestly thought that they were saying "wedding rain." And if it got more than a point one percent chance, then they would call the wedding off.

I'm serious. And then there was out in front of me, there was this big area that had been burned over, struck by lightning and it burned. And then a few years after that, it's got struck again, and that burned up all the residual timber. It was a big area called Biggs (B i g g s) Flat (F l a t).. And until I saw it on the map, I thought it was "Big Splat." Does that make any sense? Anyway, that's how my career began.

KP: That's another example of sometimes the universe just lets you look like a stupid fool.

BF: Yeah. So, I had met everybody, and I really liked everybody that worked on the district, and I hope it's still the same way. But it was very family, feeling, you know. The trail crews were two-person trail crews on horseback with a mule, and they do ten-day hitches. There were construction crews, and wilderness rangers, and, of course, they told us that Comm One on the radio was only for the lookouts, and the people in the field, and that nobody else could hear it. I'm sure they probably said nobody else was monitoring that frequency, but I interpreted it that no one else could hear it. That was a mistake.

Anyway. So, you know, check in with everybody in the morning, in the evening, make sure that everybody's safe and where they say they're supposed to be. And then chat during the day, [Isan] and I started chatting a lot. It was her first season also. Oddly enough, she was friends with Israel [Taqman], who had been at Beartop for four years. When she applied, she really wanted Beartop, and when I applied, I really wanted Prairie Reef, but somehow, we ended up where we were supposed to end up.

That whole season kind of went by uneventfully. I kind of trained myself to get up and look around every fifteen minutes. Just get up. And Samsara gave me a lot of good advice in the beginning. I'm sure she doesn't even remember what she said. But she did say, "Don't be surprised if you find yourself sitting there with your mouth open, overwhelmed. And then all of a sudden, becoming so tired that you have to take a short nap." And I thought, oh, that's not gonna happen to me. Sure enough, I would catch myself just sitting there or standing there with my mouth open just overwhelmed with the tapestry out in front of me and earnestly, earnestly looking for smoke.

Of course, I've learned a lot over the years. My whole routine has completely changed. There were certain places that I was absolutely convinced there was fire, smoke, even though there hadn't been any lightning or anything. I was just convinced, but they all turned out to be water dogs, and I had learned about those. So I went that whole first season until almost the end. I was talking with [Isan] on the radio and all of a sudden, I said, "Oh my God, there's smoke out there. Do you see it?" I told her where it was and she couldn't see it, and Sam was even way further to the south, so I knew she couldn't see it. I watched it for a while, and it was one tree burning. I'm talking a little bit, and then all of a sudden, Sam jumps on the radio and says, "You better report that." I was gonna wait a little bit longer, but that was that. I called it in. I figured out where it was on the map, gave the quarter of a quarter of a quarter section, called it in, and they told me to keep watching it. They talked to the AFMO, and he said that he would fly it at 11 o'clock the next morning, so great. I watched it. And then of course, I really didn't have any fire behavior training at this point. None. And I did not understand how, how it all worked. So, about nine o'clock in the morning, I get in touch with the AFMO Kyle [unintelligible], and I say, "Hey, save your money. There's nothing happening out here. And there's no smoke." He said, "Well, we're gonna fly it anyway."

I said, "Oh, man, there's nothing there. Save your money." I'm thinking--I don't know what I was thinking. So, they fly over. I think it was 5-5 XRAY. I hear him, and we start talking and I'm watching him through the spotting scope. And there's this plane way out there--little teeny plane. It starts to circle, and I watch it, and it's circling for like five minutes. I'm thinking, well, they're circling so long, because there's nothing there, and I had made a mistake. Then all of a sudden Kyle comes on the radio. And he says, "Well, Bill, you have a fire. One tree burning. What do you want to name it?" And I said, "Well, I guess it's in the Rock Creek drainage. Let's just name it the Rock Creek Fire." He said, okay, and soon as he said, okay, Isan comes on the radio, and she goes, "boring." That's kind of how things were that year. And then I monitored it. They decided not to attack. It was in a sort of a high bowl, and they were gonna let it burn. It was pretty much surrounded by rocks. And I was pretty much full myself, though. One tree burning at thirteen and a half miles. That was the beginning. I thought, wow. So, I watched it. And then things started to go south with my mom towards the end of the season, and I had a phone, a cell phone, that I was told not to use.

And I called Russ and I told him, "Listen, I think my mom's in the hospital." They had called me and told me that they would call you and tell you to turn on your phone and call headquarters.

So, I did that. They told me my mom was in the hospital and to give me this number. I called and talked with her for a little bit and she sounded okay, a little spacey, but I think that was on a Friday. I was getting resupplied on Tuesday. This is kind of off the subject, but I made a deal with the nurse that I was going to call on Monday at one and I did and my mom was unresponsive so I made the decision to leave. And Russ without even really knowing much sent along a saddle horse just in case I had to leave. So, Joe came up on Tuesday and we shut down the lookout. Then I started walking. I walked to Gates Park; got there by nine o'clock at night. The trail crew was camped there, and they pulled a tent and a sleeping bag out of the cache and set that up for me and they had a hot meal waiting. The next day they got up at five and cooked breakfast so we could just get up and ride out. I made it home barely in time to be with my mom when she died. So that was the end of that first year.

I stayed in St. Louis for a few days. Then I came back, because they were gonna have us continue to work on until Thanksgiving. We were at Benchmark, Isan and I, and a bunch of the crews and we're cutting up hazard trees and stuff and we'd been there for a week or two. Then they decided they bring a crew over from Belt, from White Sulphur Springs, which is part of the Forest. And they came in right after supper. We're all sitting around in the cabin and, you know, they introduced themselves. And we went around the room and introduced ourselves. I said, "I'm Bill " and then it got around to Isan" and she said, "I'm Isan" and all of a sudden, they said, "Oh, the Bill and Isan Show. We would listen to you every night." It was hysterical. Because we thought we could talk about anything. We were, you know, appropriate, but still we thought it was a private semi private conversation. So that was how that first season ended.

KP: So, you did two more seasons at Beartop?

Yeah, two more seasons. Fairly somewhat uneventful. In 2010, a woman at a hunters' camp late in the day got kicked by a mule in both kneecaps, the wrong way, not behind the knee--in the front. So just broke them. So, she's down on the ground. And the outfitter broke into a cabin and tried to use the radio. I jumped in there. The protocol was for us to get in touch with our boss. And then if not that, then the district ranger. It might even have been a Sunday night, I don't know, but no one was home. I left messages. And I just made the call--called the sheriff's department--we need an air ambulance. This woman's okay, but she can't walk and it looks like both legs are broken. So, there's a big storm coming in, and they're coming in, and I'm watching it on the radar. By now I have a smartphone. Big storm coming in, and they just barely made it. They got there and got her out.

In 2011, my last season there, was probably the most traumatic. I hiked out and went to a wedding at Walton [Ranger Station, Glacier National Park]. It was up there in Essex where one of our rangers was getting married. And then I hiked back in, and I hiked into Gates Park over the pass. That was like seventeen miles and I spent the night. I ate a little packet of oatmeal and was headed back up to my lookout where all the food and everything was. I got almost up there, and there was a call on the radio. "We have a severe medical emergency. Who is in the area of Spruce Creek and North Fork of the Sun [River]?" And I waited. I knew where I was and I

figured I was the closest but I waited to see if anybody else was. The horse packer was coming in with my resupply again. But he was way, way away. So, I said okay, and they said would you respond. I hung my pack on a tree and grabbed my headlamp and my radio and took off running. I ran down the mountain and before I got all the way down to the trail along the river, they radioed me and said it was no longer a medical emergency, but that I was needed there. So, I rightly assumed that whatever had happened, the person was now dead.

KP: I have to break here for a second. , I'm going to stop the recording in this meeting and then I'm going to come back to you so if you both will just stay there for a second. Is that okay?
Stopping the session.