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Interviewee: William "Bill" Fox
Interviewer: Donna Hartmans
Date of Interview: September 1, 1989

Donna Hartmans: Okay, this is September 1, 1989. An interview with Bill Fox, an architect in Missoula. Why don't we start again with your background?

Bill Fox: That same thing?

DH: Yeah. [laughs]

BF: Okay. Well, I'm a native Montanan. I was born in Butte, and I went to elementary school and high school there. When I decided on architecture, I went to the University of Washington, in Seattle.

DH: And what year was that then?

BF: That was 1926, freshman. To repeat, there was 36 of us in the freshman class at that time, and when we graduated, there were six of us got degrees. They told us at that time that the percentage is pretty much the same in later years [unintelligible] numbers. But anyway, there was there were six of us graduated. Then I went to the 50-year reunion here a few years back, and out of that six graduated, there were five there for the 50-year reunion, which is kind of unusual, I guess. I graduated in 1931. I got my degree in 1931 [unintelligible]. I was a freshman in '26.

DH: So it was a five-year program?

BF: Well, there was a few requirements that I didn't...outside the school, there were some requirements that I didn't have, so I had to spend a little more time, and I got my degree in the middle of '31, in the summer of '31 as I remember. Of course, to be historical, the crash of 1929 was a big thing. In Seattle, at that time, there was 50,000 people in the bread line out there. The crash of '29. There weren't any jobs. In fact, I went looking for a job, and I went into a number of different offices. I remember one in an old building [unintelligible], and I went in. Way over in the corner was a desk and the architect was sitting, an old guy, and he was the only one there. He told me that there just weren't any jobs for architects. It was a terrible time to graduate in architecture. There was no building of any kind going on. So...I took crazy jobs [unintelligible]. Just temporary ones. But, of course, Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1932, in that period, in the '31 period and '32, and through some connections I had I got a telegram one day from Missoula, saying that there was a job in the engineering department, and that I—

DH: Of the Forest Service?

BF: At the Forest Service, yeah. If I could come over and have an interview, I might get it. That was in 1932.

DH: So that was the regional office?

BF: Yeah.

DH: And was that over in the Federal Building then?

BF: It was in the Federal Building. They hadn't built that post office section or that addition...the addition hadn't been completed yet. But in any case [unintelligible]...Like I say, there was a lot of difference between engineering and architecture. I didn't like engineering at all. Of course, we had to take structural engineering. But we had some structural engineering requirement, and my professor was Charlie May (?). He was quite a guy. I'll tell you how funny he was. In one class, or one quarter examination, he had his desk up on a pedestal and [unintelligible], and he gave us all these problems. We had to put them all up on his desk at a certain time, 11:30 or something like that. I remember him saying, "All right guys, it's time. Get your exam paper up here on the desk by 11:30."

Some of the guys were saying, "Oh, I need a little bit more time," and all that.

He said, "Get them up here, because I know what your grades are already." [laughs]

Can you imagine that? He was quite a guy. In fact, they've got a picture...on the library of the University of Washington, they've got a sculpture of him, up on one of the things. That is, his head. But anyway, I decided to go see him when I got this telegram. So I went out to his house—it was in [unintelligible]—and I showed him this telegram, and I said, "You know what I know." And, "What should I do? Should I take this job?"

He says, "Heaven's sakes, yeah. Go out and get it." I told him he knew what I knew, and it was in engineering, see? It looked like it was an engineering job. So I came over here and got the job. Of course, the interesting part about it—they found out I was graduated in architecture, and that's how I got started in the architecture part of the [unintelligible]. That's how I got here, anyway.

DH: So there wasn't an architect department in the Forest Service—

BF: Oh no.

DH: —it was just all engineering?

BF: Yeah. Of course, the thing that happened was, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's program, which was a tremendous thing, he started the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] Corps. And funded that. The thing about it was that...and of course, there was a lot of good craftsmen that didn't have any jobs—good carpenters and good everything. Because there wasn't anything going on. During that period, these people that came in the CC's, and the guys that built them, were terrific craftsmen. They weren't beginners at all. But they were experienced people that didn't have work. That is not the younger guys that were in the CC, but the other people they hired for this building program. That's where the money came to build all these stations, and all these things that were built. Of course, they needed plans, and that's where it all started.

In fact, I brought a picture. [laughs] I found in some of my junk. When they knew I was an architect...I was the only one, in the beginning there.

DH: So were they mainly road engineers and civil engineers?

BF: Yeah. They didn't have any real program of building things. Of course, Clyde Fickes was my boss, and he had a lot of ideas of what was needed in the way of fire protection and buildings—residential buildings—and for the ranger stations, to locate them in certain areas where they could handle fire. They could live there in a reasonable habitat was his idea. And that started the ranger station program. Of course, they had to have plans, and that's where we...we was involved in these plans. Like I say, the craftsmen that build these things were excellent. I got to meet a lot of them. But anyway, that was the way the desk looked when I first got started.

Look at all this—

DH: What did you use for paper? And ink? Was it all ink?

BF: The final plans, a lot of them were ink, but I did a lot of them in pencil. Of course, after I came, we got three or four other guys that had backgrounds in architecture, some from the University of Idaho and so forth. But I got there first, and I was kind of in charge under Fickes, and we'd make schemes and designs and plans. Some of these other guys would do the working drawings and so on. Anyway, that's how the thing started. But I think one of the interesting things about it was the fact that we had some excellent craftsmen and carpenters, because of the Depression, and they didn't have any work. There was guys that came from other places in Montana that were out of work that were able to construct these things, and that's why a lot of them lasted, because they were well done by people who knew what they were doing.

DH: Okay, let's see if this is loud enough.

[Break in audio]

DH: Okay, so before you arrived to work there, what did they use for plans? Did they rely on plans from other regions? Or was it pretty much—

BF: I don't think they had any plans. They just kind of built stuff.

DH: Whatever was needed they—

BF: I don't know, but they never had an architect up there. Most of them were trails and firefighting devices and stuff like that. I brought a...have something from Fickes. He was in charge [pauses], and [pauses; looking for something]...

He lived to be pretty old. They had a deal here, this was in 1980.

DH: Yeah, he just died recently, didn't he?

BF: Yeah.

DH: About four or five years ago?

BF: Yeah. "Congress authorized several emergency relief appropriations, enabling the Forest Service to make the improvements while providing much needed jobs during the Depression era. New architect Bill Fox was one of the young architects hired by Fickes." Well, he was the boss, he was the one that hired the others. When I came for the interview, he interviewed me.

DH: So how long did you work for the Forest Service?

BF: Oh, okay. Yeah. That was in...let's see, 1938, I think. [unintelligible].

DH: I thought you said '32.

BF: '32 was when Roosevelt was elected. I don't know how...It might have been '32 or '33. Because he took office in '32, as I remember. It took a while. I can't remember. See if it says anything [unintelligible] in here. [pauses; looks through papers]

DH: But you'd had some jobs before you came back here, after you graduated?

BF: No, no. that was my first job in architecture.

DH: But you were doing some other things after you graduated?

BF: Well, we were out of work. There wasn't any jobs.

DH: Weren't doing anything?

BF: I worked on a garbage truck, and all the guys on the garbage truck had college degrees.

DH: This was in Seattle? You were still in Seattle?

BF: Seattle. Yeah. For a period. But anyway, I think it was maybe '32 that I got over here. The latter part of '32, I think.

Then we worked through that period. Of course, the other thing that happened to me at the University of Washington, I, instead of taking Army R.O.T.C. [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], I took Navy. And I got an [unintelligible] commission in the navy and graduated in four years. So I was in the naval reserve, as an [unintelligible]. When I came over here, of course, I was still in it, but I was in the 13th Naval District, which was [unintelligible] in Seattle. This was part of the 13th Naval District. So [laughs]...Of course, Hitler started, and all these things started happening in that period. Then 19... [pauses] In 1940, the summer of 1940, I had talked to my wife, and I said...The radio and everything was full of this war going on in Europe, and I told my wife that if we got into it, why, I'd get called right away, because I was in the 13th Naval District. So I decided to take a vacation trip that summer. It was about July, I think, and we went to Seattle and the coast there. But in Seattle, I decided to go to Bremerton naval yard. It occurred to me, if we got in war, that I hadn't been aboard ship all that period of time that I was over here. The last cruise I had was on the OSS Idaho; it was our last year before graduation. So I figured, if we got in war, that it would be better...if I had to go it would be better if I was doing something I knew something about. So I saw the captain over at Bremerton naval yard, and I told him what I was doing here, and [unintelligible], building and so forth. Of course, Bremerton naval yard was a...where they build navy ships and so forth. They called it the Bureau of Yards and Docks. I said to the Captain, I said, "If I get called in, it seems I'd be more useful to the navy if I was doing something that I had some experience with than if they put me on board a ship that I haven't been on one for four years."

He says, "That makes sense." He asked me what I was doing, and I told them. So we had a nice visit, and we took our vacation. That September—I think it was the end of September that year—we got a telegram, or a wire, from the navy department saying that if I'd come on active duty, they'd promote me to Lieutenant [unintelligible]. So I got the wire, and I talked it over with my wife and I decided [unintelligible]. So I told them I'd accept. I went in the navy that year. Went to Pensacola, and I ended up four years in the navy. I didn't get out until 1946. Of course, during that period, I was in [unintelligible], where we built a great deal of...for the navy. And then of course the Seabees came along, and I, with my knowledge, I was sent to Davisville, Rhode Island. That's where they had the Seabees...that was the construction battalion, you've heard of them. They had 60 battalions with 1,100 men in each one, and I became the outfitting officer of Davisville at the navy depot up there. We outfitted a lot of those battalions [unintelligible]. Then I got shipped out to the Pacific after Pearl Harbor. But I was with the building guys. They built a lot of things out there. We had plywood piles, building [unintelligible].

DH: So were you designing, were you doing architectural design work, or you were just—

BF: Well, no, no. No. I was—

DH: Construction?

BF: Yeah. I had knowledge. We had to outfit the battalion, you know, with tools and all that. There's a lot of funny things happened in that...But anyway, I was in the navy all that time. Until the war ended, of course. The night of Pearl Harbor, we were in New Orleans. I was stationed in Pascagoula, Mississippi, which was just a little ways up from New Orleans. But anyway, it was quite a period, and I still had my job at the Forest Service.

DH: They were going to hold your position for you?

BF: They held my position. So when I got back, after thinking it all over, I decided that I wasn't going to go back there. I had some income coming from the navy over a period of time. So I decided to open my own office, and I just opened an office in the Wilma Building and that's where I got started. I never did go back to the Forest Service.

DH: So you really only worked for the Forest Service for two or three years?

BF: Well, I worked until—

DH: '38, '39, '40.

BF: '40, yeah. Well, no, I worked '32 or '33—

DH: Oh, '32.

BF: Yeah.

DH: So about ten years. Nine or ten years.

BF: Nine or ten years, something like that. But I didn't see it as a permanent thing. I wanted to do something [unintelligible]. So that's how I started my own office. Indecision is the worst thing there is. You just have to decide. I think you've got a 50-50 chance of being right. But the experience in the...but getting back to what I said started, if I hadn't done that, and when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, most of those guys that I was in the navy with in Seattle were out really early in the thing and a lot of them were gone. That would have happened to me too. Because I would have—

DH: You would have been sent into action?

BF: Yeah, right off the bat. Because a lot of the guys that were in that class of mine were killed in the Pacific. Because that first part of it was...all kinds of things were happening. But if I hadn't decided to do what I did, I would have been called in, you see. Otherwise, I kind of stayed in construction field. I wasn't drawing plans. But it was related to the building process. There were a lot of things happened, a lot of funny things happened.

One incident I remember, when we were...We sent battalions over to North Africa, [unintelligible]. But we were getting tools, you know, had so many carpenters and so many different plumbers and electricians and all that. We were trying to get tools for these battalions. They figured we needed 60,000 ball-peen hammers. You know, a ball-peen hammer is? I called a supply officer, from where I was in Davisville, Rhode Island, about the hammers, and the answer was—I've never forgotten—I said, "We need 60,000 ball-peen hammers."

He says, "Do you need them right away?" [laughs]

DH: [laughs]

BF: I'll never forget that. But they went into hardware stores—the navy—all up the East Coast, buying tools, to make up the various tools and supplies that were needed for these battalions. Because they were being sent, and they were supposed to have everything they needed to do anything. That was what they called outfitting the battalion. I was the outfitting officer, before I got shipped out to the Pacific. But it was an interesting experience. It wasn't architecture, but it was...in construction we have to handle [unintelligible] could have been.

DH: Okay, well let's get back to the Forest Service days, and some more specifics about working at the regional office. Can you name any people that you worked with besides Clyde Fickes? Remember any names of any other architects?

BF: I can't remember the names. If I saw their names on [unintelligible] I would. But that's one thing that's hard to remember, is names. There was four fellows there that were doing drafting, and [unintelligible]. But I can't think remember any of them. I might if I saw some plans or something.

DH: Was there a guy named Halm? H-A-L-M? J. Halm? I don't know what his first name was. I've seen his name on plans—

BF: Yeah.

DH: —and he took a lot of photographs. I've seen his names on the back of some photographs.

BF: He was—

DH: Maybe it wasn't the same period.

BF: I recognize that name, but...I can't think [unintelligible] I knew him so well [unintelligible]. I'd have to see something that would bring it back to me.

DH: So, did you go from forest to forest and visit the sites for proposed ranger stations or complexes were planned for?

BF: No, Mr. Fickes was well informed on that, and he got maps of topography of areas where they were going to build a ranger station, and he more or less listed the requirements and what the facilities would have and so forth. Then I'd make some sketches and designs and stuff, and he would take them [unintelligible]. Then when we'd reach a place where he said that would do it, then we'd get the working going [unintelligible]. Sometimes I measured the direction, depending on how difficult it was. But he more or less programmed the requirements pretty well.

DH: What about specific ranger stations, like Ninemile Ranger Station and Phillipsburg Ranger Station, that are of a specific style? Who decided that Ninemile Ranger Station would be a Cape Cod style?

BF: I did that in stuff out here. Like I say, that was getting back to what I had learned in art. In other words, architecture wasn't these things that we do now. It was based on—

DH: It was a popular style at the time.

BF: Styles, yeah. You know, you were doing classic or Romanesque or Gothic.

[Break in audio]

BF: Of course, the colonial was an adaptation of the classical—architecture of the past. Of course, it wasn't done in stone, but it was done in [unintelligible]. The wood adapted itself very well to some of the things you used [unintelligible]. Where they weren't logs—we had occasions where Fickes might say, "We're going to use logs here, rather than buying lumber."

DH: Was that more dependent on location?

BF: Yeah.

DH: Sources of lumber and—a

BF: Location, yeah. Location and the site. If you're out in the mountains and there are big trees all around—lookout towers are [unintelligible]. We had, like I say, men that knew how to do

some of that log work. And that's how we...I didn't make the decision, Mr. Fickes usually made the decision whether to use logs or some of the, what was called, the modern—

DH: Frame structures?

BF: Framework, yeah.

DH: Some buildings that I've inventoried have been repeatedly used throughout different sites. For instance, the Darby Ranger Station, down the Bitterroot, has a couple of the same buildings that the Plains Ranger Station does up north. So you designed some package designs that were used?

BF: Well, like the plans were...In the early days, of course, we started from scratch. There really weren't any plans of ranger stations. What they did, they just built them. They built them on site. But as time went on, there was plans done—completed plans for different structures. Both log and...that would be up to Fickes and the head of the engineering department, those people would decide [unintelligible], "We'll build some of the same structures we used over here in this one down here." That saved a whole new process of—

DH: Designing specifically for a site.

BF: Yeah. If it was adaptable to the site. Sometimes we'd check that out, or Mr. Fickes or the department, to see whether the plan would adapt itself to another site. Of course, in a lot of instances, it did. But that decision was made by somebody else besides the architect. I remember the Bozeman...I think outside of Bozeman [unintelligible], and some of those eastern places [unintelligible]. I think we used logs up at Phillipsburg.

DH: No, that's a frame.

BF: Yeah.

DH: Yeah, the rough sawn siding. And has a lot of craftsman details, a lot of brackets and—

BF: Yeah.

DH: Are you familiar with the Raven work center, Raven Ranger Station, which is between Libby and Kalispell? Did you—

BF: Yeah, we did the plans—

DH: You did the plans for that? That's all logs. That's a really nice. It's been really well preserved, because they've used that up until a couple years ago.

BF: Yeah, those last. Those log buildings, they sure do. Answering your first question, there were plans on file, and if they had some plans that were adaptable they'd—or we were too busy with something else—they would decide to use some plans that had been done before. Because they had a lot of people out in the field working, and that part of the program was really moving. There was times when you couldn't produce plans fast enough to keep all those people busy. That's when they would use some existing plans if they were adaptable to the site.

DH: Something I've also noticed is, they would take a plan for a warehouse and use it at various sites, but then it would be modified at one site. Like, they'd put dormers on it, or if it was a five-stall warehouse, maybe they'd enclose two stalls and make an office out of it. So they left that up to the particular ranger station to modify a plan if they wanted to?

BF: No, I think that was all done under Mr. Fickes'...He ran the thing pretty [unintelligible]. He knew what was going on. And if they wanted to make some modifications, why—

DH: He had to approve it all?

BF: He had to approve those, yeah. I don't think [unintelligible]. There was some that could sell him a bill of goods, of course. [laughs]. But he had to approve it.

DH: Were you involved with lookout tower designs?

BF: Yeah. We were involved with the drawings so they could be constructed. The actual height of them and some of the other things—

DH: That was determined by the site?

BF: Yeah. The site and some of the Forest Service people. And how many people were going to be involved in it, and whether they were going to be permanently...Some of them lived up in those things and some of them you don't. Some of those things were decided [unintelligible].

DH: So you never had to go out and supervise any building construction?

BF: Oh, yeah. Like I say, I visited the sites during construction. A lot of times with Mr. Fickes. But the point I made at the beginning was that we had some craftsmen, because of the times, that were skilled in their work. Maybe some interpretation of the drawings and stuff like that came up, but we had some excellent craftsmen.

DH: So there wasn't as much supervision as needed.

BF: No, no. Then, of course, there wasn't any incentive to skimp, like you might have in some projects, where the contractor might want to save a buck here or save a buck there. You didn't have anything like that. Some of our present—

DH: Local contractors?

BF: Well, there's building jobs that you have to supervise to be sure that the quality is maintained, where you take competitive bids [unintelligible]. But there, the people that were building were working for the...They weren't contractors. They were working for the—

DH: Oh, I see what you mean.

BF: Yeah. They were employees. There was no incentive not to make—

DH: Or it was CCCs that were building.

BF: Yeah.

DH: Building the complexes.

BF: CCCs did a lot of the work. Of course, like I say, the guys that were in charge knew something about construction, [unintelligible].

DH: Well that does put it in a different perspective. I never thought of it that way.

BF: Yeah. During that period, that was the...I don't know what it developed into in later years, but during that period when the programs first started, and Roosevelt got it going, and the Forest Service...they were trying to get work for people. Of course, the Forest Service was in the lucky position to be able to take those federal funds and put people to work. Of course, we had a lot of fellows from the East Coast and all over the United States that had never been in this kind of country. But they had some knowledge of various things, and they were so anxious to get work that people really worked hard. Of course, they lived out in the country, and they had the boarding tables and evening facilities. They had cooks and all these things that were going on, where they were being furnished food and lodging and stuff, all a part of the—

DH: So it was a pretty good deal.

BF: Oh yeah. It was a great deal. It lended itself to getting good construction, you know. Because there wasn't any incentive not to. Then, like I say, you had people that had knowledgeable experience, who were not able to find work in the United States, that were out here doing this kind of thing.

How much time are you going to take?

DH: Well, actually, I think a lot of the things were answered that I had questions of.

BF: I'd like to go about 2:30. It's 2:20 now.

DH: I guess, any more specifics?

BF: I can come down again.

DH: I'll call you up later, and—

BF: I don't know that I did you any good or not.

DH: Oh yeah, yeah. We've had a lot of interviews with people, old Forest Service employees, from the '30s and '40s that have worked for the Forest Service.

BF: Have you?

DH: Yeah. People that were lookouts, in the lookout towers—

BF: I wish I could think of some of those guys that worked, I should know...but there's a period in there where you forget names, when you get old. I have a hard time [unintelligible].

DH: Did you ever do any work for the Forest Service after you came back in terms of any design work later on, on your own, as a private architect? Any interaction with the Forest Service?

BF: [laughs] I can't recall. I don't think I did. I did design a residence for Mr. Fickes, though when I was in the private business, yeah. And those places up at camp, at Paxson on Lake—

DH: Seeley Lake?

BF: Seeley Lake. Camp Paxson. I did those—the plans for those—for the Boy Scouts. Trying to think who the scoutmaster was. But I did the plans for those. But I think that was while I was still working for the Forest Service. Can't remember though. But we did those for a lot of places up there.

Dining halls, I remember dining halls. But I don't think I did any...The other thing, of course, when I opened an office, [unintelligible], because it was after...I almost said World War One...World War Two, and there wasn't too much competition. A lot of the architects who were in the war weren't in operation either. So when things did start [unintelligible] here was quite a bit of work, particularly I got a lot of work at the University [University of Montana]. [unintelligible] there were bigger projects than the Forest Service. [unintelligible sentence]. Did Missoula's only skyscraper, I remember that. [Unintelligible sentence].

DH: Oh, on the corner?

BF: That was our skyscraper. [unintelligible] did the library, the law building, and the music building. One of the [unintelligible]. [laughs]

DH: So when did you retire from architecture?

BF: Oh, just a few years ago. I think I was 75. I still have a desk and an office in the office. I don't take any part of any of what's going on. [laughs] Yeah, yeah, I worked...I think it was [unintelligible] about five years ago. I think I was 75.

DH: So you started the office and took on partners afterwards, or did you?

BF: Well, I started the office and I was operating it alone, and then I heard John Ballas—priest out of Saint Anthony's was a friend of mine, [unintelligible] and I gave him a job. He worked, and then after a while I made him partner, when we were [unintelligible]. Then George Barrow came along, graduated from Bozeman, and he went to work for us. He worked a few years, and then I made him a partner. Forget how many years.

DH: So this is, like, the early 50s?

BF: Yes, [unintelligible]. And the gal at [unintelligible]...She came to work...somebody sent her down and I interviewed her, and she sounded smart and [unintelligible]. So I gave her a job and she worked for us for 22 years, I guess. [laughs] It was a good time for building during that period.

Well if you have any...Like I say, you forget things. If I'd see something or see a drawing with somebody's name on it, it might generate some thoughts. That does it sometimes. I don't know what else unless you had some specific questions. It was an interesting time, and like I say, the fact that we had good craftsmen was a real advantage. I hate to say some of these things, but in the...the old craftsmen we had—this was after I [unintelligible] architecture—the bricklayer and the carpenter too had a lot of pride in their work. After their time was up, they'd get out and look and see what they did during the day. I remember, on the music building [at the University of Montana] out there this way, we had that brown [unintelligible] that was all laid in brick. It was kind of tough to get that circumference. But I remember, at the end of the day, when we were doing that, the bricklayers would always get back and look at it. They were taking a lot of pride in the fact that they were able to do that. This was true with the craftsmen at that time. I always felt that the unions—the carpenter's unions, the bricklayer's unions—didn't emphasize craftsmanship to the extent they should have. They were all labor emphasizing hourly rates. And the younger guys that came in didn't seem to get the real feel for the craft.

DH: The artistic eye—

BF: Yeah, the craft. That's part of the remuneration. And that was true when they were doing the Gothic stuff, and some of these other...the guys that were doing it were... part of their

remuneration, in addition to their pay, was just being able to see what they've done. And that was true of a lot of the early craftsmen [unintelligible].

DH: So when do you think that stopped in your private architecture firm? When do you think that that changed?

BF: Well, when these older guys, older carpenters and bricklayers started to die. [unintelligible sentence] In other words, I think if the brick unions and carpenter's unions had done some efforts to emphasize skill, and maybe even have training for them. They had apprentices. The apprentice program. But that was...they'd go out and work on a private job as an apprentice and they didn't get paid as much, but they were supposed to be learning something. But if they'd have had some apprenticeship school or a training school or something that the unions actually maintained and taught the guys something, they would have had some better craftsmen. Of course, some would have dropped out. They'd find out they didn't like it. You know, didn't want to be a bricklayer and that sort of thing. But they never did emphasize that at all. I think that's where the union made mistakes, myself. But the craftsmanship was part of the, like I say, part of the personal remuneration. When you get something done, you got to look at it [unintelligible], "I did it. Or helped do it." Part of the—

DH: It's part of the whole effort.

BF: Part of the effort, yeah.

DH: Well—

[End of Interview]