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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: 296-001
Interviewee: Joseph Paul Caffrey
Interviewer: Patricia E. O'Connell
Date of Interview: September 1, 1993

Note: When this interview was conducted, the interviewee requested that the recorder be turned off at one point, but the recorder kept running. Archives and Special Collections has chosen to include that "off the record" portion because it pertains to homesteading in Montana and the interviewee is deceased.

Patricia O'Connell: This is Wednesday, September 1, 1993, in the afternoon. You've lived around Pablo and Polson for how many years?

Paul Caffrey: Well, ever since 1913.

PO: 1913? The thing I wanted to interview you about, Paul, was when you were a young man, you took flying lessons down in Kansas City.

PC: Yeah.

PO: You were living here in the Pablo-Polson area on a farm or ranch, and you went down there. You must've been in your 20s, weren't you?

PC: Yeah.

PO: Was that before or after Lindberg made his flight across the sea?

PC: I don't know, when did he make his flight?

PO: '26, I think.

PC: Well, it was about that time.

PO: Where did you get the idea, being a farmer and in agriculture, about learning how to fly?

PC: Well, there was an airplane come through here taking passengers up for three dollars a ride, I believe, and I got the idea that I wanted to learn to fly. So I went to Kansas City—

PO: How did you learn about Kansas City though?

PC: I don't remember.

PO: But you went?

PC: Yeah.

PO: You must've been rich.

PC: Yeah.

PO: Were you?

PC: Yeah, yeah, I was rich.

PO: And you went to Kansas City.

PC: Yeah.

PO: And you went to a school.

PC: Sweeney Aviation School.

PO: Sweeney Aviation.

PC: Yeah, and they taught the mechanics of airplanes and also give flying instructions and flying lessons.

PO: Do you know where they were located in Kansas City, about? Were they east, south, north or west?

PC: Right down the middle of Kansas City by the railroad tracks.

PO: Right across the street from the depot?

PC: Yeah.

PO: Where did you stay when you went back there? Did you stay at the school, or did you rent a room?

PC: No, I rented a room for a month. Then I got a room in a hotel and stayed there for some time. I don't remember how long. Long time.

PO: And you went out to this place for the aviation. It probably wasn't too far, was it?

PC: No, a block and a half or two blocks. It was pretty close.

PO: Who was head of it, do you know?

PC: No, I don't remember. Some Sweeney (?) were there. I don't remember which one. I think it was two or three Sweeney's, but I don't know.

PO: And you took aviation mechanics?

PC: Yeah.

PO: And how many students were in your class, do you know?

PC: No, I don't remember that. It was probably a couple dozen.

PO: Oh, but it would be say 20 or 30, and it wouldn't be just five or anything.

PC: No, it would be a couple dozen. I don't know.

PO: Yes, and did you take any flying lessons?

PC: Yeah.

PO: And how many of the kids were taking flying lessons?

PC: Four or five, maybe. Just a few. They only had one, two planes to give lessons on and one instructor, and they only took them out to the airport two or three at a time.

PO: Out to what airport? Not the one downtown?

PC: Oh no, it was a little private airport. I don't know the name of it. It was about six, seven miles out.

PO: About six or seven miles out.

PC: Yeah. There was a streetcar run out there [pauses] twice a day.

PO: How did you get to Kansas City? By train, or did you drive or what?

PC: Train. Northern Pacific Railroad.

PO: Did you have a good trip?

PC: Yeah.

PO: You left from Missoula or from Ravalli?

PC: From Polson.

PO: From Polson at that time?

PC: Yeah.

PO: [pauses] Did you transfer trains very often?

PC: No, not very often, but I don't remember. I suppose we were transferred in Missoula, I imagine, I don't remember.

PO: Yes, and you went right to Kansas City. Did you go to Des Moines or to Denver or anyplace?

PC: No, no, it was direct. We stopped at some places, I suppose. I don't remember, but we didn't change trains.

PO: Did you make any good friends at the aviation school that you kept in contact with for a while?

PC: Oh yeah.

PO: Did you?

PC: Yeah.

PO: And you worked on machines.

PC: Yeah, learned the mechanics of airplanes.

PO: Do you know what kind of motors they were or what kind of planes?

PC: Well, yeah.

PO: What kind of motors?

PC: Well, one of them was an O-X...O-X...Gee, I forget, O-X, I don't know. It was a World War One plane, old Jenny, with an O-X motor in it. I forget...then another one had a Warner Scarab engine in it, five cylinder.

PO: Warner's Scare?

PC: Scarab. S-c-a-r-a-b. Warner Scarab—

PO: Engine.

PC: Yep.

PO: And you learned how to take those apart and put them together?

PC: Yep.

PO: Did you have any teacher you particularly liked or that you remember there?

PC: I just had one teacher in that stuff, and I liked him.

PO: You'd go out to the airport six or seven miles a couple of times a week or once a week or when? To fly?

PC: I think about twice a week. I don't remember too much about it. It's been a long time ago.

PO: And you stayed there about a month?

PC: Stayed at the airport?

PO: No, at the school about a month?

PC: Oh, about a year.

PO: A year?

PC: Yes.

PO: [pauses] Do you remember anything particularly happening in Kansas City or at the airport at that time?

PC: Yeah, I remember when the Graf Zeppelin come through there.

PO: Did you?

PC: Yeah. It come right within a couple of blocks from the school, and I could get a bird's eye view of it. I climbed the flagpole on top of the Sweeney Aviation School, and I was up right level with it.

PO: [laughs] You would be.

PC: I could see right in the windows and see the people.

PO: [laughs] Why didn't you stay back there? Your family needed you or something?

PC: Sure, all my family was here. I stayed back there a long time. It took a couple years of that aviation business. That guy I was working for...After I got through with Sweeney, the guy I was working for—a fellow by the name of Fafelle—he started making airplanes, and he give me a job.

PO: What was his name?

PC: Fafelle. F-a-f-e-l-l-e. Fafelle, I believe. I believe.

PO: And he was making airplanes?

PC: Yeah.

PO: What did he make, do you know?

PC: Yes, he made a training plane called the Blackbird. He only made two of them.

PO: [laughs] That wasn't a lot, was it?

PC: No. At that time, the stock market crashed, everything went bust and he lost all his contracts. He went bust, too. Well there I was stuck in Kansas City, 1,500 miles from home, no money, no job, no nothing. [laughs]

PO: Well, you weren't alone.

PC: No. It took me another five years to get money enough to get home.

PO: Really?

PC: There were no jobs.

PO: You were there a long time then!

PC: Seven years I was away from home.

PO: [pauses] You were there seven years all together, right?

PC: Yeah.

PO: [pauses] Well, tell me about the stock market thing.

PC: Well, everybody knows about the stock market going bust in '29.

PO: When did you hear about it? You were working for this Fafelle?

PC: Yes. Making an airplane. I guess everybody heard about it. I don't know. That's when it was, in 1929, and that's about all I can say about it. He went broke. He lost all his contracts for airplanes, and he went broke. I was supposed to work there at least one year. I invested money in the institution, and I was supposed to work for one year and have an airplane of my own. But then he went broke, so I didn't get an airplane and I didn't have a job. I didn't have nothing.

PO: What'd you do? You evidently didn't starve to death. You're still with us.

PC: Oh no, no, I applied for a job through an agency—an automobile agency—downtown, and I got a job at a garage. I worked there for several years.

PO: What kind of an auto agency was it? Just a garage?

PC: Repairs, auto repair.

PO: They didn't sell cars or anything?

PC: No, storage and auto repair.

PO: Do you remember the name of the company?

PC: Oh no, it wasn't a company. It was just a private man and his wife that owned the garage, and he only worked two people besides himself. A small institution, you might say.

PO: You were lucky to get it though, Paul.

PC: Yeah, I was.

PO: I mean, when I ask you about the Depression, I know about the Depression.

PC: Otherwise, I'd probably been on WPA [Works Progress Administration]. I never got on that. I stayed away from it. I had a little work here and there all the time I was in Kansas City, enough to supply me with groceries, food, and that's all. I finally got enough to—

PO: Did you marry while you were in San Francisco? Not until you came home?

PC: No, I should've, then I'd had a wife to go work and support me. I should've held up my hand for it. Or did you push it on me? [refers to turning off tape recorder]

PO: They'll know you're joking. [laughs] It'd be kind of nice to have a wife to support a person.

PC: Sure! Sure. [laughs]

PO: I think about that Depression...I just wanted to interview you about the aviation, but I think the Depression is so interesting in a terrible way. It was such a calamity for so many people.

PC: Yeah, yeah. It sure was.

PO: So you must've come back here in about '33 then, or '34?

PC: Well, I think it was '35.

PO: Was it?

PC: I think so. Yeah. '29, yeah, '35. Yeah.

PO: Well, I'm just so surprised at you going back there and taking flying lessons, and that you were going to have a plane and all those things.

PC: That was not unusual. They was a lot of guys taking airplane training.

PO: There were?

PC: Sure. Quite a bunch of them in that school. They was a lot of them in the school that wasn't taking airplane training. They was auto mechanics in there too.

PO: Oh, they taught mechanical things.

PC: Yeah. Yeah, they did. That Sweeney Aviation, it was kind of a run-down joint. I think at that time they had a beautiful, big building, five or six stories high and lots of room. But the Depression got them too. They was about ready to quit, I think, soon after I left there, or maybe four or five more years. They was, I think, broke.

PO: You know, people nowadays can't...young people can't think of those things, and I remember people—well-respected moneyed people who were just left with nothing.

PC: I didn't know any moneyed people. I was just a poor old farmer boy.

PO: Well, I didn't know big money, but I remember we'd go by a place by the name of Thompkins...Thompson or Thompkins. I had met these people, and I we'd go by there place and he'd broke his leg. Bill Thompkins (?). He couldn't work, and he lost all of this money. He was a farmer in the stock market thing. They were some of the leading farmers—the big house, big barn, the acres.

PC: Where was that?

PO: In Dakota.

PC: Oh, yeah. Well, I don't think it took very much or very many years to break a farmer, most of them.

PO: No, probably not. But when you came back here, they were in the middle of a Depression here, weren't they?

PC: Well, my folks was on a farm, but they was never depressed.

PO: They always ate?

PC: Always ate. Always plenty of food, and they didn't need much money. They didn't go to town very often. I know in the wintertime we lived out there, they would be out there for months at a time and never get to town, except horseback to pick up the mail.

PO: Good thing to keep you young fellows home.

PC: Yeah, yeah. Quite a life.

PO: Well, I remember it not too kindly.

PC: You was in North Dakota?

PO: Well, in South Dakota for 14 years.

PC: South Dakota.

PO: My grandfather farmed, and he lost his shirt. My father got in the cattle business and later in the oil business, but he did well in the cattle business. Even if it was Depression and stuff, he did. They were running cattle up from New Mexico up here because they were cattle that had good, stout hooves and could walk to water. You know, you get some of these cows that are babied, and they can't walk very far to water. Their feet hurt.

PC: That's the kind we always had, but the water was close. [laughs]

PO: Anyway, we brought those in. I look at white-faces down there, and I wonder if maybe some of those are related to the cattle that we brought in and sold.

PC: Probably are. They brought them in from Mexico?

PO: New Mexico. But some of them had come from Mexico.

PC: Longhorns? No longhorns. White faces.

PO: No, we did have a longhorn once, and it almost killed my father. I was up on a rim rock, and I saw him come in to the ranch from the valley, and he got out to open the gate and I knew the steer was coming at him. He just walked quietly and everything and was opening the gate. He opened the gate, and then he started back to the car and he looked and saw the steer coming. He jumped in the car, and all I could see was his dust flying. The steer hit the door, broke off his horn, broke a hole in the door, but my dad was all right. I just stood up there and watched that happen to this—

PC: I'll be darned.

PO: —guy, and I thought...[laughs] you know you're up there up there so far I couldn't even have any more gotten down. I couldn't yell to him or anything.

PC: How far was you from him? At that time?

PO: Oh, I'd say the valley was about half a mile wide, and I was up on a rim rock that was about 200 feet high. I rode fence on the south side of the ranch. I was up there and just happened to see the car come in, and I didn't pay much attention but here comes your dad, you're sort of watching what he's doing.

PC: You was horse backers.

PO: Yeah, but he was a nice guy.

I suppose you remember CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] out here, don't you?

PC: Remember who?

PO: CCC? Did you have CCC boys out here? You did, didn't you?

PC: No, not that I know of. I never got into any of that WPA or CC [CCC] or any of that stuff.

PO: Well, I know this isn't your thing, but I do think it was an interesting thing the way the boys from cities came into CCC and some of their paychecks were sent home.

PC: Yeah, yeah, I heard about some of that too, but I never got into that. After I got back home, I always had a job around here working someplace.

PO: Did you like mechanics a lot?

PC: Well, yeah, I didn't mind it at all. I did all right.

PO: You liked it better than farming?

PC: No, I loved that farm. After I got on the farm, I loved that farm. I still do. I still wish I was there. I really do.

PO: Well, Paul, I'm so glad to get this.

PC: That [unintelligible] farm. I put a lot of blood and sweat and tears in that. I really loved it.

PO: Don't you think anybody that farms and does anything with it puts blood and tears—

PC: Sure, sure.

PO: and they never get too much money out of it.

PC: That's right, but it was hard work. Yeah, but I loved every bit of it. The last ten years on the farm, I was married then, and I didn't want to build a house out at the farm so I lived in town here and drove out there back and forth, every day. In the morning, I could hardly get out there in time to go to work seemed like it. Always in a hurry to get out there and go to work. Get things done.

PO: Have cattle?

PC: Yeah.

PO: What'd you do? Plant and have wheat and potatoes?

PC: Sure, yeah. Barley and hay, diversified farm.

PO: And you had some cattle? Milk cattle or feed cattle?

PC: Yeah, milk cows, in them days. Milked a few cows.

PO: And you farmed with horses I bet?

PC: Well—

PO: Or did you get a tractor?

PC: We did a lot of farming with horses up until, well...[pauses] Dad got his first tractor in 1928 or '29. I believe it was a '28 or '29 when he got the first tractor.

PO: Was it a Ford?

PC: No, it was a Caterpillar. Crawler-type. He used that for several years, and then he got a rubber-tired John Deer. We used that for just about everything.

PO: They didn't have TVs or stereos or air conditioning either, did they?

PC: No, we had radio.

PO: Really? My dad used to come in so black from the fields, dirty.

PC: Oh yea, we did too. We did too.

PO: You're out there in the hot sun with a straw hat on.

PC: Sure, yep. I remember it all.

PO: But you remember mostly farming with tractors? Planting crops and—

PC: Well, I did a lot of it with horses before I ever went to Kansas City. A lot of it. You bet. Four horses, five horses on plow. Four on a harrow, four on a drill, four on other stuff, and five on a plow—two-bottom plow.

PO: Paul, knowing you as long as I have, I would say that your parents are probably very neat and your farm equipment was taken care of. Most of it under sheds or stuff.

PC: Yeah, horses were taken care of. Yeah, you bet. Dad, before he went to Perma, he was a harness-maker in Iowa—

PO: He was?

PC: —so he kept the harness up in good shape too.

PO: You came out in 1913.

PC: I come down to the reservation here in 1913 from Kalispell.

PO: Oh, you were Kalispell before that?

PC: Yes, he moved to Montana in 1900.

PO: He did?

PC: Yes. Had a stump ranch up there north of Kalispell on the Whitefish River.

PO: Do you remember much of that?

PC: Well yes. I can remember a lot of stuff when I was a kid—young guy—but I can't remember a week here now.

PO: I can't either, but I can remember when I was a kid.

PC: Yeah, yeah. Dad had a stump ranch up there. Ma, I've heard her say more than once, I wasn't born. She found me under a stump. [laughs] Probably about right. I don't know. I don't know.

PO: Well, what was a stump ranch or a stump farm?

PC: It was timberland at one time, and the trees were cut down all that these stumps was left.

PO: Did you pull out the stumps?

PC: A lot of them, yes. Yeah. A lot of them had farms.

PO: I couldn't see how they could farm the stump land.

PC: I don't know. We had 30, 40 acres there that was farmable, and the rest of it was river bottom and stump land. Not much farm to it, pasture.

PO: But your dad didn't do harness making then? Or did he?

PC: No, no. He just kept his own harness up. Kept his own [unintelligible].

PO: Well were you born in Iowa?

PC: No, no.

PO: Born out here?

PC: No, on the stump. She found me under a stump. You got all this?

PO: Well, I think it's funny. [laughs]

PC: You think what's funny?

PO: That your mother would tell you that.

PC: You got that on this thing?

PO: Yeah, a lot of parents told their kids things about where they came. Some of them came from cabbage patches.

PC: Yeah, I've heard that too. No, we didn't raise cabbage. We raised carrots.

PO: [laughs] Well, I'll turn this off.

PC: Oh, leave it off.

PO: Now, you had carrots, and some of them would be 14, 15 inches long and you could carry them over your arm like would wood.

PC: Sure, from the garden we carried them to the root cellar on our arms like wood.

PO: And they were white.

PC: Yeah.

PO: I think that's odd. I've never seen a...well, a white carrot would be a turnip, wouldn't it or—

PC: No, it was a white carrot.

PO: You're sure it wasn't a parsnip? [laughs]

PC: No, it wasn't a parsnip. It was a white carrot.

PO: I never heard of that.

PC: You didn't? Oh, well—

PO: Now, was this out on this farm south of Polson, or up on the stump farm?

PC: Up on the stump ranch. Yep.

PO: How come your father came out here? Because he heard of free land or something?

PC: I really don't know. I don't know. They come out here in a box car.

PO: Well, I think most of them did.

PC: Yeah. I suppose they landed Columbia Falls. But that's about all I know about him coming out here. They had two kids before they come out here.

PO: They came out here to find you under a stump?

PC: One of the kids is still alive, my sister.

PO: How many kids were there in your family, Paul?

PC: Six. Six, seven—

PO: That's a big bunch.

PC: Seven, I guess. No, I think they lost one before they come out here. I don't know too much about it. Folks never told us much about—

PO: They were busy living the days as they came.

PC: I guess so. Never told the kids anything. My sister and I get...June and I get together once in a while, and we talk about that. We don't know these things because the folks never told us. They never told us when they got married or where they got married or a darn thing, you know.

PO: Don't you know the town they came from in Iowa?

PC: Yeah. Pleasantville.

PO: Pleasantville. What a pretty name.

PC: Yeah, that's about 30 miles or so west of Des Moines. Near as I can figure it out. I never been there. I've been down to Iowa and Kansas, but I never was in Pleasantville. There was nobody back there that I...any relation of mine that I knew of.

PO: You probably had some, but they were so busy—

PC: My relations mostly was around Kansas. My dad's brothers, his father, and his brothers and his sisters was all into Kansas.

PO: So you going to Kansas City was no big deal. They had been there once?

PC: Well, they was quite a few miles from Kansas City, and I was afoot. Yeah.

PO: [laughs] If you told your folks you're going to Kansas, they at least knew where it was.

PC: Oh yeah, I suppose. I suppose.

PO: What's your sister June's last name?

PC: Carson (?).

PO: I don't think I know her, but it's nice to have somebody to talk to, isn't it?

PC: Sure.

PO: About things that you remember a long time ago.

PC: Sure, we try to find out things and some of Dad's sisters or something used to be around the country, we'd ask about them. Wish we could see some of them, and maybe they could find out something about the family. But the folks never told us kids anything.

PO: Well, I guess I knew quite a bit about it, because we lived on my grandfather's farms, and he went back to Jamesville, Wisconsin, all the time to see his brothers and sisters and relatives.

PC: Well, them folks on my side of the family, they're all dead by now. Gone, long ago.

PO: Were you born about 1915 then?

PC: 1902.

PO: Were you?

PC: Yes.

PO: Couple years after your folks came?

PC: Yeah. See I'm getting to be an old codger.

PO: Well, aren't we all.

PC: You're pretty young, yet. I'm the oldest guy around the senior citizen's right now.

PO: Are you sure? Bernice is 93.

PC: Well, the men, I don't know about these. Some of these women are pretty old. I know that but—

[break in audio]

PO: You learned to play bridge back in '30s. I want to tell you something about my playing bridge. I don't know where my mother learned, but in 1927, I was seven years old and my mother was going to teach bridge at the Catholic Church as her contribution to the church. They had a hall there, and people could take lessons and spend money. She didn't know how to teach it, and she didn't know too much about it so she got my dad and my cousin and me at the kitchen table and show us how to play the old kind of auction bridge.

PC: Yeah.

PO: Then, when I was about 12, contract bridge came in, and she had a class of contract bridge. She was determined I was going to learn. I've often heard of the joke, since then, about the little kid that says to his mother, "Can't I go out and play," and she says, "No, shut up and deal."
[laughs]

[End of Interview]