

Oral History Number: 163-013

Interviewee: William P. Weber

Interviewer: Rosa Stone

Date of Interview: August 13, 1986

Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project

Rosa Stone: This is an oral history interview this morning by Rosa Stone on...

William "Bill" Weber: With Bill Weber.

RS: Okay, Bill, let's start in with your religious background.

BW: Well, I was raised as a Methodist, my mother was Methodist, my dad was...semi-Methodist. He attended church occasionally, but not too often. But my mother was a strong Methodist.

RS: Did that give you any difficulties in getting a 4-E classification?

BW: It did, it really did, because at that time the Methodist church wasn't really strong in that field like this Quakers and the Mennonites and... There was several times—I appeared before the draft board twice before they gave me the classification, and then it took them quite a long time to make the decision, but they finally did make the decision to give me a 4-E classification. I think it took most of winter. I think that we started in fall of 1940, getting that classification, and it wasn't until the spring of '41 that we got the classification.

RS: Now you say "we" when you talk about classification.

BW: Well, as I say, at that time, my mother—I was only 21 at the time, and I didn't know much about the rules and regulations—so she was somewhat instrumental in getting—

RS: Supporting.

BW: Yeah. Information. She did quite a bit of correspondence with the Quaker organization at that time, to get the rules and regulations, because as I say, there wasn't much information from the Methodist church on—

RS: You were kind of a loner in taking this stance.

BW: Yeah, right. In my area there, I was the only one that asked for it.

RS: You were from...?

BW: I was from Kendall, Wisconsin, at the time. We had discussions about it. Our Young People's meeting, and so forth. And they—the Young People's were supportive, but not—their thinking wasn't that way. They didn't feel that that was the way to go. The world was at war, and we were going to be at war, and so forth, that our job was to support the government in that respect.

RS: Yes. When you got your classification, then, where were you assigned? And what transfers did you have?

BW: Well, originally, I was assigned to Merom, Indiana, and that was—as I say, we got the classification in March or so of that year, and September I got my notice to report to Merom. I think it was around the middle of September, I reported to Merom. That was '41. We were in Merom at the time that the announcement was made that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and we knew then that we were in there for more than just a short assignment. A lot of us felt that we were in there for more than a short assignment anyhow, at the time. Things were building up at that time, we had a feeling it was getting ready for war.

RS: Was it there that you found out about smokejumping?

BW: No. At Merom, our first year there we did mostly building of ponds and fencing them off, and more or less conservation work there. And then a notice came to the camp that they wanted volunteers to help open up the Coleville [California] plant—camp, not plant. Camp. And wanted as many people as wanted to go, or who could volunteer. And I guess quite a bunch of us volunteered. We were shipped out of there on, much like a troop train, it was fellows from other camps, and they put us on trains. And we loaded on a train, I don't know exactly where we got on, but when we left Chicago there was quite a trainload of us, from all the different camps in the Midwest. West to Coleville. Just like a troop train. And we arrived in Coleville—I think this was in the summer of '42. I think I was one summer at Merom and then '42, I was out in Coleville. That was because we were advertised at that time as firefighters, they wanted people to come out there because—

RS: Oh, you were firefighters then.

BW: Yeah. To be firefighters, because it was a—well, they didn't tell us at the time, but afterwards we learned—because of the incendiary bombs that the Japanese were sending over. They had quite a crew of us out there; I mean that was a big camp.

RS: Did you learn firefighting then, before—

BW: That's where I learned firefighting.

RS: I see.

BW: We learned firefighting there. That was harder, really, in a way, firefighting than this, because we went to the fires in trucks. And we were on the fire line for days at a time. Here, you're never more than two or three days at the most, but there we were weeks, actually, at a time.

RS: But you must have liked the firefighting kind of thing in order to apply for smokejumpers?

BW: Well, I think, again—and I think somebody mentioned this the other night—it was the challenge of it, partly, and the fact that our friends and so forth were in highly risky jobs in the war, we felt that, to give credibility to our stand—

RS: Yes.

BW: —we should do something more than just build fences. Anybody can build a fence around a stock pond, but there's very few people that were willing to jump out of airplanes to fight fires. And I think that was part of the reason that I volunteered for the smokejumpers.

RS: You found out while you were in this place, fighting fires, about the smokejumpers—

BW: At Coleville?

RS: Yes.

BW: Oh yeah. There was a notice on the bulletin board one day, that they needed more smokejumpers out here, and so I applied. It was quite a while in coming. I mean I applied and maybe three or four months before I even heard, and I thought, well, they weren't going to take me, and suddenly one day there was a notice saying that I should report up here.

RS: So where did you get your training, then, when you got up here?

BW: Now see, I came in '45, and they were training out at Ninemile.

RS: Oh yes.

BW: I don't remember who the trainer... who our leader was in the training. I remember the first couple days I could hardly hobble around, because of the terrain. It was rough and tumble, and I thought I was fairly—you know, I had been working with firefighting down there in California, planting trees, and I figured I was in fairly good physical condition, but I found out that I was a long way from it after going through the training here.

RS: The training was hard, wasn't it?

BW: It was good too, when you stop and look at it and remember that, when you're on a fire, if you don't know what you're doing, you can be a real liability to the rest of your crew. So I never regretted the training. It was hard, but anything you have to do in this world is usually hard.

RS: And then you had projects in between the times when you went out on fires? You were working on projects? What kind of projects were you on?

BW: I really wasn't on that many. See, we came in '45, and '45 was a busy year. We trained, I made seven practice jumps, and by the time we got done with the practice jumps, fire season was underway. I actually moved from the Ninemile camp into Missoula, where we were stationed prior to going out on the fire. And then I hardly got back before I was out there. I think was at one of the nurseries, I can't remember the nursery now, but I think I worked out there a couple of times, when there was a little slack, but the fire season was so rabid that year that I was more or less just on a sort of a rotation basis. Hardly sometimes get time to go back to the main camp. I remember one time, we came in and main camp was empty, they didn't even send us out. They kept us right here and we came right in, just rested here in Missoula and went right out again. So it was a busy fire season.

RS: Did you get a lot of compensatory time, from being on fires so much?

BW: Well, I did, but I never used it. I got discharged that fall, so I never had any use.

RS: Waste of time, wasn't it?

BW: Fire season was over with, and I never had a chance to use it. But I made seven practice jumps and then I made ten fire jumps. And never had any real bad injury. I was probably one of the lucky few.

RS: Now you say real bad injury, that means you got some bumps and—

BW: Well, a few bumps, and I sort of flattened my foot out once. I got so I could hardly hobble around on that foot for a little while, but it didn't last that long. I still have a little trouble with it now and then. But all in all, it was a good jumping for me, I never had any—I landed in a tree once, and it wasn't very high, I never landed in a snag, I never landed on a rock, I never rolled down the hill. I mean, you know, all the stories you hear about smokejumpers? I never was a part of those.

RS: You don't regret that either.

BW: No, I certainly don't when you think what some of them went through.

RS: Were you ever on the rescue team? Did you ever have to help carry someone out?

BW: No, no. I thought one time we were going to. We jumped on this fire, it was not a very big fire, and we had eight of us on the load, and I was one of the first two to jump. I was on the ground, and they made the pass for the second two to come. And the first fellow jumped, and the chute didn't open. And all you could see was this... waving like a flag, and he pulled his emergency chute, and it opened, but it didn't open clear up, it got caught in the other one, and so it only opened partway. And he was coming down pretty fast. And he came down close to me, right beside a rock, and the rock—it was closer than where that stump is to where he landed. If he had hit that rock going the speed that he was, he would never have made it, but he hit a big pile of pine needles that was right close to the rock, and it knocked the wind out of him. He laid there for a little while. I thought he was injured, but he wasn't injured at all, and he was able to get up and help with the firefighting, but that was the closest I come. That was close.

RS: Just seeing a buddy get that close is kind of scary, isn't it?

BW: It was. When we saw him come without—it was just the two of us down there, we were a little bit worried. And he come so close to that, and he was coming so fast. And he just hit those old pine needles, and they just knocked the wind right out of him.

RS: You never got into the lake, or—?

BW: No, but I worried about it once in a while when we'd jump close to them, because the wind tends to suck you in there. We never did fall in a lake.

RS: And with all the heavy gear you had, this would have taken you right...

BW: Well, we had these belts, you know, that you just hit and they snap right open.

RS: Oh, I see.

BW: They did have a good harness on us. I think one fellow got—not a smokejumper, but one other fellow in another unit that was doing firefighting, he had also the same kind of harness as we did, and he got hung up in a tree and he panicked and he hit this thing before he had his rope tied to the tree, and he got killed. That was—I don't know who it was, it wasn't with the army or something. It wasn't with the CPS [Civilian Public Service]. I remember it though.

RS: Oh yes, you would remember it after you've been in like circumstances. What was the most interesting fire that you jumped on?

BW: I think the nicest fire that I jumped on was—we went out, oh, must have been about three or four in the afternoon, we went to Glacier National Park. And it was a fire sort of on the ridge up there, and the ridge was sort of divided into terraces, with a terrace about a hundred foot wide, and then there was a big steep wall and another one like that. We jumped on one of the

terraces, the terrace that the fire was on, and it was a small fire. And we had it out, I think it was six of us on that fire if I remember right. One fellow wouldn't jump, I remember that. Wasn't one of ours. I don't remember why he was with us, but he wasn't a smokejumper, but he wouldn't jump. I don't know why they took him along, because he was Forest Service personnel, but he wasn't CPS. And we jumped into this Glacier Park, and we had the fire out probably about 10 o'clock, and then we just stayed around there. And the next morning we had to hike out, and there was the nicest, beautiful-est bunch of moose I remember seeing, just a big herd right down below us. We were up on this kind of table-like thing, we could look right down in the valley. That was the nicest fire we worked on.

RS: You got to see Glacier Park.

BW: Nice to see Glacier Park.

RS: Some of the remote area.

BW: Yeah. It was back, I don't know how long it took us to get back out again. I think they didn't come in after us right away, we walked down to—I think they packed us out, in fact, if I remember right. We were packed out on a couple of fires.

RS: So they picked you up then in a big truck.

BW: And then they picked us up, yeah. They picked us up with a truck. One, I can't remember which fire it was, they picked us up with a plane. They came back and picked us up with a plane.

RS: But usually the truck was there.

BW: Yeah, the truck usually came and picked us up.

RS: You had a 100-mile ride back to—

BW: Yeah. [laughs]

RS: In the truck. That sounds like quite an adventure too. Did you have a lot of fires where you had just two and three jumpers on them, small fires?

BW: I don't remember. I think there were a few. I remember one night we went out and there was just three of us in the plane. And we were going to jump on a fire, and then the pilot looked—the spotter looked at the thing and the fire was very small and the terrain was very bad, and he decided that it wasn't worth the risk to drop that late at night and in that kind of terrain. It was a lot of rocks sticking up, and it was very rocky, and so we came in. But most of the fires I went on was full eight people, a full crew.

RS: Eight was your standard group?

BW: Yeah. Eight was the... Most of the time all of them jumped. Once and a while they didn't jump all of them, if the fire didn't warrant it, they sometimes took some of them back, if it was a small fire, but most of them I went on were all eight-man fires.

RS: Did you ever have to set any backfires?

BW: I don't remember any backfires, no. I never got to a fire that big.

RS: What was the longest period of time you were on a fire? How did they vary—from just a very short time to—?

BW: Most of them were short. Most of them we were back within a day or so after we went out. I think the Glacier fire was the longest time we were out on any fire that I remember. But as I say, again, 40 years, you don't remember a lot of things.

RS: You still remember some! What was your most interesting experience while you were in the smokejumpers?

BW: That's a good question. I think that probably the fact of just parachuting onto a fire was probably the most interesting experience of anything. I mean, when you stop and think a minute. Never having jumped out of an airplane before in my life, and then coming in here and taking that training and then—I would say the most interesting experience was the first day out.

RS: The first jump?

BW: Yeah, the first jump. We loaded the plane—there was eight of us in there—and as luck would have it, I was the first one to go. So I sat in the door with my foot on the—they had a little bit of a ledge there, you had your foot on that and my knee on the floor of the plane—and this plane took out, and my stomach started going like this, and I looked down there, and they said, "Don't look down, look at the horizon." But I mean you're riding up there, you look down, that's where you're gonna be going pretty soon.

BW: The first thing I knew it was way up there, and the guy says, "Okay, it's time to go."

BW: And right at that point, everything sort of went blank. No kidding, I thought, 'Oh my God, this is the end. There ain't no more.'

RS: [laughs] Right.

BW: And out I went. And when that chute opened, there was no greater feeling in the whole wide world as when that chute opened. It just was a real big relief. Because you know when you're looking down there, and you think what if the thing had come unhooked? And you're so scare, I don't think I'd ever pulled my—

RS: Ripcord.

BW: —my ripcord that first one. I mean, after that it wasn't quite so bad. After you'd been down a couple of them, then you realize that it wasn't that bad. You knew that if you'd fallen for a while and it didn't—something happened, you knew that you should pull that. But that first one, I bet I'd have went all the way to the ground before I ever pulled her.

RS: For your first jump you were the first one out?

BW: The first one out and I was as scared as scared can be, and I ain't ashamed to admit it either.

RS: Oh, yes.

BW: I had been frightened before in my life, but never that frightened.

RS: Not that frightened, right.

BW: But I kind of liked it after I got into the end of the thing. I didn't mind. Every time you went up, though, no matter how many times I—as I say, I jumped 17 times—you really got a up tense, a little uptight. Because you just never knew what was down below you there. But the jump itself, I mean there's nothing more exciting, in a way, more—when you're hanging up there. You ever jump?

RS: No, I never jumped. Never intend to.

BW: When you're about 2,000 feet up, and the plane is gone, you don't hear a sound. It's the quietest of anything that ever happened to you in your life. There's no noise. When you're on Earth there's always a little bit of noise, because there's a bird or a mouse running around, but up there there's nothing. It's just complete quietness. And you don't feel like you're moving at all—

RS: No sensation of falling?

BW: No, no sensation, until you start getting near the Earth, and then you can see the trees coming up at you, and then you know you're coming down. But when you're up there high enough, everything looks like it's just hanging there. You're looking down on it, it's quiet, and

you don't feel any air rushing by you, you feel as though you should feel the air rushing by you, but you don't.

RS: You don't feel the air either?

BW: Just like you're hanging there. Suspended in space. It's a good feeling. I like that end of it.

RS: And then when the trees start coming up toward you—

BW: Then you know that you'd better do something, and fast. Actually, you start doing it before that. Once you leave the plane, then the idea is to find where you want to land, and then the chutes were made so you could steer them. By pulling down on one side you close one opening, and that would let the air out the other side, and that would bring the chute around so you could steer it. And then you could, if you wanted to plane you could pull down on the risers and that would plane you, if you wanted to go faster, or you pull on the back ones if you wanted to slow down.

RS: Did you get pretty good at that?

BW: I wasn't bad. I mean, I could come in pretty close to where I wanted to be. Once in a while the wind would fool you a little bit, but most of the time... They gave us a good training, I must say. The unit I was with got good training, in using those, and we had, as I say, seven practice jumps, and when you got done they told you what you did wrong. When we went back to the loft and learned how to do it right. And it was good because when you're up there and you see a great big pile of rocks, you don't want to land on the pile of rocks, you want to know how to get away from the pile of rocks. And so we had—as I say, I'm real pleased with the training we got at CPS.

RS: Did you enjoy the food, when you were out on the fires?

BW: Well...K rations, or C rations, or whatever they were, are C rations. The thing that I think I enjoyed the most of what they sent us out there, they always these grapefruit slices in their own liquid. You've been fighting fire all day, and all you've drank is that water that they send you down in those tin cans, there was nothing tasted better than that juice and those grapefruit slices. I'd have given everything else in that K ration away if I could had traded for another bottle of grapefruit slices.

RS: Now someone said they established their eating habits during smokejumper years, and then they kept the eating habits even when they led a more sedentary life. Did you experience any of that also?

BW: No, I don't think so. We ate good, there's no doubt we had good food and so forth, and I gained a little weight in smokejumpers—not very much.

RS: But you haven't since the either?

BW: No. I weigh less now I did then.

RS: You're one of those fortunate people.

BW: [laughs]

RS: Now, being in smokejumpers, did that interrupt your...or, the whole CPS experience, did that interrupt what you wanted to do in life? Where have you been headed before the age of 21, wherever one is headed then?

BW: Actually, it didn't really interrupt anything, it actually was a sort of a turning point in my life. I probably would have ended up being a farmer because that's what my dad was and that's what I was doing at the time. Which is nothing wrong with that, I mean I enjoy farming and so forth, but it gave me a whole new outlook on life. I think it's an experience that I never regret, and as I was saying this morning at the meeting there, we need that for our young people today. Not in war, and I think a lot of people go to war because they want to experience something different, something exciting, something challenging. That's why I think that the space program was such a great thing for our nation. It was a chance for, it was really an inspiration for our young people to do something constructive, something that challenged them. And then we had that catastrophe in January [the crash of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*] which, now they're making a big thing out of it, it just makes me sick to think that the military's been able to, should we say, make the NASA look so bad so that they can sort of make themselves look better and get to get the control of it. But our young people need something like that. I mean war is something that has been glamourized. You never hear the screaming or the dying or so forth when they advertise it on television. So when a kid is 18, I mean he's restless, I mean he's tired and sick of doing what his folks are doing. He wants to get out, he wants to be a part of it, he wants to be a pioneer in something. He wants to Go West, Young Man, or go to the moon or go to the stars. And we've taken that away from our young people. The only alternative we give them is war. We had NASA, now we're taking that away from them, we're saying, "Well, if you want to be in NASA, you want to go to the stars, you join the army and then we'll let you go to the stars maybe."

BW: And there I think is a frightening thing. But, as I say, if I was 21 today, I would volunteer for astronaut, I would. I know that our present space program has been maligned and we've tried to make a scapegoat out of a few people that made an error or two, and yet you have to remember that we sent up an awful lot of shuttles before one crashed. Because we had one accident, it's no sign we have to cancel the whole thing and act like it was a terrible thing. It was a terrible thing, the accident itself, but the fact that we made a mistake, we shouldn't necessarily have to stop right there and say, "Well, we're not going to go any farther; we're going to hand it over to another agency and let them do it, because they can do it better." And

that's just what the military was after all along. I mean, I don't care what the military says.
[laughs]

RS: Yes. And because that wasn't available to you, smokejumpers filled that same bill.

BW: Right, it did. I think that I think if you talk to a lot of people here, that you will find the same thing for them.

RS: That they would be astronauts?

BW: They would probably astronauts or some similar thing. I mean it was something where you felt that you were you were a pioneer. I think that's what opened our country up where it is today, was the people that wanted to get away and do something different. They were pioneers. Not all of them were.

RS: Something important.

BW: Right. Something important.

RS: And you know, as we sit here amongst these trees, we know that saving this is important.

BW: Right.

RS: It really is important. You were already close to nature, and close to the soil.

BW: Right.

RS: By being raised on the farm. And to come out in the smokejumpers and see this view of the West, and the preservation of the trees was pretty important. What did you do then, after smokejumpers?

BW: Well then I went back home and the first thing I did, I worked—oh my dad, he was still on the farm, and he was getting elderly, and he needed a little help so I helped him out, but then—I don't know what organization had this Horses to Europe thing, I think it was a UN thing if I remember right, and they wanted people to come and ride the boats to Europe and help care for the horses. And since I'd been on the farm and knew horses, I thought, oh, why not? They gave me \$100 for the trip, and they fed you. And so I thought, well, I'll just take a ride over to Europe, and so I took a load of horses over. Had a nice trip. It was, again, a government thing where they rounded up a whole bunch of wild horses off of the prairies of Texas and they loaded them in this ship. The horses were not used to being in there, and a lot of them were fighters. Oh, some of them were real fighters. They had good pens there, but some of them you didn't dare get anywhere near them. They'd kick and they'd—they had about four veterinaries on there, and a lot of horses died, I don't know, it was—well, I won't say any more about them.

Anyhow, then we got back from there and I could have went over again. They asked if I'd like to go over as foreman. They'd give me, I don't know, 1,000 dollars, I don't remember what the amount of money was, but it was good pay if you'd go as foreman and take care of the thing. And I said no way. I'd seen how it went. The care was poor and it wouldn't have been any better whether you was foreman or whether you was just an ordinary laborer because it was set up, the veterinaries more or less ran the show. They decided whether a horse should live or die. They carried medicine with them, but I mean, you couldn't have done much better. So I decided no. Well then, I got a letter from American Friends Service Committee. I suppose almost everybody else that got out of CPS got one, I don't know. And they said that they were interested in people to go over to Germany—the war was over now, and they needed people to go over there to help distribute food and clothing. They were setting up a center in Paris, and so like all young adventurers at that age, I said, why not? I mean here's another chance to get out and see the world a little bit. So I volunteered for that, and went over and—I got back from the cattle boat in the summer of '46, and I think I left for Europe around, must have been October or something. Arrived in Europe sometime in November. And it was in Paris. Worked in France for a while, and then a chance to go into the French zone of Germany opened up, so I went in as a—

Oh, I worked in France, that's where I worked, they had sort of work camps there where they had young people from all nations working. And I worked in those for a while. And then a chance to go to Germany opened up, so I volunteered for that. I was a great volunteer. And, see, two of us went into Germany first, to find lodging. That was an interesting experience. They sent us in, and I didn't know hardly any French, and so I met with a French commander there. We looked for housing. And so he says, "I'll tell you. We'll get you some housing," he says, and so he went around to these German houses and he says that they needed some housing for some Americans coming in. They didn't say they were Quakers and so forth, and they said, "You will have to move out."

And I said, "No, that isn't the way we want to do it." I said, "We're not coming in that way." I says, "We wanted to live with some German people." Well, by accident I met—I don't know how this happened—a German girl, and she said, well, she said her mother had an extra room that they'd fixed up after they'd been bombed out, and I and this other fellow could stay there. So we did, and then we got to know some other young people, and first thing you know we had enough housing for our whole unit to come in too, living with German families. And that was the way we had it all the time we were there. We lived with German families. And we helped them out, and they gave us the housing.

RS: Did you do...Was it building work, or cleanup work, or...?

BW: Well, it ended up to be mostly cleanup work and food distribution. We set up a center in, I think it was in a barracks there, and we set up a food distribution center. They shipped in margarine and flour and quite a bit of stuff from the Quaker headquarters here.

RS: And people were glad for this?

BW: Yeah. Then they rationed it out to the people that—I don't know exactly. They worked with...I wasn't involved in that so much because there were a number of Quakers came over. This was a Quaker outfit and then they hired European Quakers to come in and help, so there were German women that had some affiliation with the Quakers over there before the war and during the war, and they were involved. A girl from Ireland was there; she came in and helped. And then a number of—I don't think they were very many CPSs there. There were a number of young people there from other nations. I think there was a fellow named George Hokel (?). I think he was in CPS at one time. He was there. And then there was a Carl Welty, who was a professor at Beloit College; he just died this last year, just last summer. He was made the, shall we say, not the manager; can't think of the word. He ran the thing, you know. He was in charge of it. He was very good at getting on. He spoke German fairly well, and he had a good relationship with the German people, being a professor. The Germans have a high respect for educated people, and he was a professor at Beloit College, and it worked out real well. He had a good relationship with the Germans—all of us did, for that matter, considering the fact that we just ended a war with them.

RS: Yes.

BW: We had young people's groups, and they used to meet together, and we had a lot of young Germans and they'd come in, and we'd have good discussions about why the war was and what we could do about it, and what we could do about preventing it from ever happening again and all that. And they were interested in that because they were just like the rest of us. They actually knew more about what war was like than we did. They'd been through it.

RS: They were victims.

BW: They were victims. So we had a great relationship, and that was a great experience. I was there from '46 to '49.

RS: And you never did go back to the farm then, after that?

BW: Well I came back then in '49. They were sort of closing those things down. The economy was picking up in Germany and they didn't need that kind of help anymore. And I went back to farming and got married the next year. Bought a farm and farmed from the time we got married, on our own farm, 'til '57, and then we set up a photo studio. We ran that from '57 'til 1980. We didn't really get into portrait work until 1960. In the meantime we had three children. The two oldest were born in '53 and '54, and the youngest in '60. My wife was teaching, and so we had the farm and the studio and the kids, and the teaching job.

RS: And teaching—

BW: Kept us busy.

RS: That's a lot of activity.

BW: Yeah. Then I got involved in politics, that's when I got involved in politics.

RS: That's one of the impressive things to me is that you have been able to keep that focus of helping others to give their vote in the peace-making direction.

BW: To me—now everybody has their own interpretation of how you should handle this thing—the power of the nation lies in Washington. We have to remember that. We can make a lot of little decisions out here in the country, and it looks pretty good right close to home, but the real power lies right in the legislature. In the Congress and in the Senate. If we can communicate to those people what we're thinking, and enough of us do it, those people are just like you and I. They've got sons and daughters, they got—they're not all warmongers. A lot of people think Congress don't have much brains, but there's a lot of good people there. There's a lot of poor ones too. But, as one congressman told me, he says, "Sure, you write," but he says, "I don't hear very many people expressing the same sentiment." He says that my mail don't have that kind of—they're supposed to represent the people, and if you only get one letter from Bill Weber saying that he's opposed to building any more atomic bombs, and you get ten people from Bill Weber's neighbors saying go ahead and build those bombs, you're gonna go ahead and build those bombs, because you know that those ten people have got more votes than Bill Weber, who only has one. No matter what your conscience may be. Because you represent that district. And I think that we're negligent not expressing our concern to our congressmen, and to our senators. Because they appreciate it.

RS: This is something that, as a non-Mennonite, it may be more ingrained and inbred in you than in has been in Mennonites. I don't know if you've seen that difference. Back during the war, at least, the Mennonites were not politically oriented. They didn't see the value in saying anything to the government. They were kind of more like anti-government. And I think your voice is a very important voice, and especially—you may be one of the few that can reach the Mennonites. What was your feeling about the Mennonite boys when you were in CPS?

BW: I think that the thing that impressed me about the Mennonites—and I think this is true of the Quakers too, in a larger extent—they really believe what they're saying. But I think you could say, they insulate themselves against the world. They're saying, well, I'm not going to get active in politics because it's a dirty game. And I'm not going to be involved in it. But they have to remember that, if they're not involved in it, they're going to be a part of it anyhow.

RS: And the politics will be dirtier if they—

BW: [laughs] That's right.

RS: So that you just need to keep saying what you're saying. Even when you're in a group that is more insulated.

BW: Well I think that's only fair. That's the only way. You can be true to yourself. As the saying goes, when in Rome, do as the Romans do, but that's not necessarily always true. I don't mean that you should say things that will irritate or make relationships between you and the other party difficult. But I think that if you believe, if you have a way of doing it, that you should express it. Not to force it on them, not to say that this is the way to go, but to say, like I did just a few minutes ago about the Peace Academy. I know that that didn't go over too hot. But again, it gets people to thinking. I think that that's what we need. Whether they think like I do isn't important. But I think that education—the primary objective of education is to create thinking in people. Whether they think exactly like you do is not important, but to get them to think. And the same with politics. Whether they agree with you or disagree with you is not that important. But the fact that you got their attention, there is some value in it, that's important.

RS: And you know the value of a number of individuals who write the letters will make an impression. It's individual people doing it.

BW: Right. That's right. And it's like that one senator told me, he said, "We have to go with how our district thinks." And he says, "The present thinking in the district is that building atomic bombs is the way." He says, "I may agree with you that there's a better way," but he says, "that isn't the consensus of the district."

BW: Until enough of us do that, and do it enough times, we're gonna have the people representing those that are wanting to say, "Make us more bombs. Send our boys to Nicaragua."

RS: How do you feel about the age that your smokejumper buddies, and yourself, have come to? What do you envision for yourself, and—?

BW: Well, let's say that any time after 65 it's bonus years. [laughs] I'm thankful that I'm still alive. We have to remember that a number of them have already gone. That the chances of us being around the next year, every year get slimmer and slimmer and by the time the hundred-year period comes there won't be probably any of us left. Yet I've have a good life. I have no fear of death. I just hope that—as I say, we built a solar home. We felt that was a contribution to society. It was nothing that's gonna save the world from being taken over by the Arab nations, like they could have if the Arabs had controlled the oil like they had, but it was a symbol. Says, you don't have to depend on the OPEC cartel to—in other words, we don't have to send our boys to open up the Iranian oil fields. It was a protest, in a way, really.

BW: There was talk, well, if we can't get our oil, back in '73, we'll get it another way. If we can't get it one way we'll get it another way. And a lot of people would have liked to have done it

that way. But enough people started buying smaller cars, started building solar houses and so forth so that you didn't have to go after oil that way. We finally got the world so flooded with oil we don't know what to do with it. And I think that that—people don't realize that. They say, well, you've got more oil because they produced more. But they were producing it at the same rate before, it's just that we weren't using as much. And the reason we weren't using so much is that people realized. And a lot of people realize this. We talked to people when we built that solar home. We talked to people that had never thought of it that way. And they said, yeah, you're right. If enough people did that, we wouldn't be depended upon Arab oil, Iranian oil, and so forth. And I think that we've got to think in those terms. Not that we go out and protest everything that comes along, but that we do things that make war less possible.

RS: And live in a manner that, if everyone were to live like that, it would be better rather than worse. Live as best we know. It may not be the best way, but the best we know.

BW: As one guy said, if everybody was perfect, we wouldn't have any need for preachers. But anyway... [laughs]

RS: [laughs] But as you think of your total scope of your life, the smokejumper experience was a really nice, solidifying—

BW: It think it was, I think it was. I think—

RS: —experience for you.

BW: It satisfied a desire to contribute something to the world, and yet do it in a way that was a little bit risky. I think that's what makes war attractive to a lot of young people. It's a sort of a form of Russian roulette. Here's a chance to risk my life against the odds. The odds in war aren't very good nowadays, but—

RS: Right. [laughs]

BW: [laughs] But I think all young people have...I mean, the kids that jump in cars and drag race and all that stuff, they do it, partly as a protest, maybe, partly as...I don't know...

RS: Desire for that risk and adventure.

BW: Right, that's right.

RS: Adventure. Have we missed anything here, Bill, that—

[End of Interview]