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Oral History Number: 453-022

Interviewee: Brian Miller

Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Kjell Petersen

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Project: Northwest Montana Lookout Association

Kjell Petersen (KP): Greetings, lookout friends. Thanks for checking out the Northwest Montana Lookout Association's Oral History Project, where we strive to capture memories and experiences of current and former fire lookouts. I'm Kjell Petersen, along with Beth Hodder. Both of us are board members for NWMTLA. Beth, do you want to say anything before we move on?

Beth Hodder (BH): No, I'm just looking forward to having a really wonderful interview with Brian Miller.

KP: Beth is the project manager for our Oral History Project with the Association and coordinates closely with the Mansfield Library at the University of Montana, where our interviews are permanently stored. Plus, once they're online down there, then we also load them onto our website for the public to enjoy forever. We're privileged to have Brian Miller with us today. Welcome, Brian.

Brian Miller (BM): Thank you.

KP: We have the unique privilege of having somebody with us who shared part of his very young early lookout days with his dad, Gene Miller, who has some interviews stored on our website. Gene staffed various lookouts around the northwest to the tune of about fifty years. So, we're gonna get a younger version, a younger memory of, of what Gene shared with us earlier. I'm really excited to see what Brian remembers from starting out with a five-year-old brain.

Brian's website has a number of qualifications on it that are just too deep for me to try to learn. So, I'm going to ask him to share those with us, like PT and MS and OCS and CMTPT. And RCA. So, Brian, if you want to start out by just sharing your professional qualifications with us, and then when you're ready, you can launch into where you grew up, and where you went to school and all sorts of that information. And I think we're ready if you're ready, Brian.

BM: I am. Thank you, Kjell. Thank you, Beth. It's a privilege to be here and to share my history of the lookouts, my experience with lookouts personally, and also just my relationship with lookouts as a family and as an individual. And so, yeah, I'm going to first answer your question Kjell about what all those letters in that alphabet soup after my name really means. I am a physical therapist, and also have a master's degree in science. As part of my physical therapy training, I got some extra credentials, which include orthopedic clinical specialist. And I'm also

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certified in dry needling, which is the CMTPT. In addition to that, I like working with runners and all things running. I'm certified by the Road Runners Club of America as a coach, so I have that credential. I don't coach people actively but I do work a lot with runners. And I do teach running clinics in the valley here in the Flathead. But I will go on to a little bit of my history unless you have other questions about that.

KP: I think I'm ready.

BM: Okay. So, most of my growing up years have been in Montana, though I was born in Indiana. When my parents were in graduate school there and undergraduate years, Mom and Dad met in Indiana, in the small town of Goshen, where Dad and Mom were in school. Dad went on to get multiple degrees that led him to education, and then brought the family back to Montana where he grew up, when I was four years old.

We settled in the small town of Potomac outside of Missoula, Montana, so pretty much all my memories are of Montana and I truly identify as a Montanan. I went to a small grade school called Potomac, and it had two grades per classroom. And it had maybe at most ninety kids in the whole K through eighth grade, school student body. It was a good experience. I look back in those years in retrospect and recognize that I have lots of fond memories of actually growing up in a rural area. But at the time, you know, you think because you don't have the city life, you don't have all these opportunities. But in retrospect, I had more opportunities than most kids. Mom and Dad were busy building our house as I was growing up, so I spent a lot of time playing outdoors. And that action of playing outdoors led to a wild imagination and a relationship to the outdoors that just kept on growing, especially when I was on lookouts.

I'm going to go through the rest of my summary of my history up to now and then I'll get into the details about what it was like growing up on lookout towers with my father during the summers. So after grade school, I went to high school in Missoula at Missoula Hellgate and then I went on to Stanford University in California, where I got a degree in Human Biology. My intent was to go to medical school, but then I got enticed back into the outdoor world.

Right after school, I worked in an outdoor education center, in Fairly, Vermont—Hulbert Outdoor Center. I do have to tell you, just a little funny side story. Fairly, Vermont had a quick response squad that they decided to name it the Fairly Fast Squad, you know, and they took it seriously., but I guess they were more than fairly fast. But I do love that name.

I worked in that program for three years, became certified as a wilderness EMT, then moved back to Montana. I just felt the pull get back to Montana because this is where the mountains were real in my opinion. I took a job at the Izaak Walton Inn as a backcountry ski guide, and I oversaw their program in cross country skiing. I taught skiing; I guided trips into Glacier National Park; I did all things skiing in the program, but also did a little marketing, little bit of housekeeping, maintenance, all those things. I really became part of the family it was owned by. Larry and Linda Vielleux were the owners of the Inn at that time.

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Then this young gal who decided to come and work at the Inn during the summers during her college years, made acquaintance with me, and the one year that I did stay in the summertime working there, we were hiking partners. And by the end of the summer, we were engaged. So Heidi Harris, now Miller, has joined me for the rest of my adult life together. And we have two boys, Reed and Kyle who are now in their twenties. We still love to hike and play in the outdoors.

One thing I should mention, during my years at the Izaak Walton Inn, I took up a big adventure where I walked from Mexico to Canada, following the Continental Divide. And at that time, there wasn't a complete trail that inked all the sections of "official" trail at that time, so I pieced together a lot of the trip and made it in about six months from April to October, roughly following the Continental Divide, starting at the Mexican border, heading north. When I got to Colorado that year, they had an El Nino year, so they had two hundred thirty percent of normal snowpack in June. I had to change gears and in two weeks I flipped my itinerary and came up to Montana, where in 1993 it was a really low snowpack. It was seventy-five percent of normal at the end of April. I restarted my trip after a delay pushing through snow in Colorado. I did come back to Montana in June and then started hiking from the Canadian border south. Well, 1993 was the wettest ever recorded in Northwest Montana, actually any of the months ever recorded in Northwest Montana. It was July 1993. It was wetter than January, February, March, when you usually think of a lot of precipitation. But that July, it rained for thirty-five out of forty-five days that I was hiking through Montana. And it was it was trying, let's put it that way.

KP: Like that this spring, too.

BM: Yeah, in fact, as I'm looking right out here, out the window, we're having a steady rainfall that is making everything green.

So, after hiking the Divide, I met Heidi. We decided to get married in 1995, and then I went to graduate school at the University of Montana in physical therapy from 1996 to '98. We then moved to the Flathead Valley, where I worked as a staff therapist and then started my own clinic with a partner, Tim Gibbs 2007. We have Advanced Rehabilitation Services, which we have owned for fifteen years as of this conversation.

As I mentioned briefly, I've the two boys, Reed and Kyle. Reed is finishing up at the University of Montana, but he is currently studying in the University of Granada in Spain. He will be working in Tanzania this summer in a nature conservancy project, back to Europe in the fall before he eventually ends up at the University of Montana in the spring to finish his last few classes. And my son Kyle, who's just finished his freshman year at Montana State University in Bozeman, is currently working for the Forest Service in trails. He is stationed in the Great Bear Wilderness, doing a lot of cross cut work and then in the front country, some chainsaw work, keeping those trails open for all of us who love to play on them. In fact, yesterday, Heidi, Kyle and I went for a

hike, and Kyle decided to bring the chainsaw and we cut out twenty trees on this trail that we went on. We love trails and we love the Forest Service and love helping them out.

BH: Was that a Forest Service trail?

BM: It was. It was the Ingalls Mountain Trail, which is to the west of town here by Little Bitterroot Lake. So, my current hobbies are running ultra-marathons trail running. I'm training for a 50k race. That's about a thirty-one-mile race at the Big Sky Ski Area called The Rut. That will be at the beginning of September, end of the summer. And that will involve climbing three big peaks in this run. So, I'm doing lots of running as I can. I put on some trail races as a race director and a fundraiser for the Foy's to Blacktail Trails Organization. Just a week and a half ago, I put on the Herron Half Marathon, 10k, and 5k trail races, and then in September 18, I put on a trail marathon that's called Foy's to Blacktail Trail Marathon. That runs from above Lakeside up to the top of Blacktail Mountain and then all the way to Herron Park for twenty-six miles. So those are what keep me busy right now. And so that's my history in a nutshell. So, what I thought I would do right now is go through my experiences on fire watchtowers.

KP: Yes. May I jump in with a couple of things before I turn you loose? You caught my attention when you mentioned Potomac in 1967. I was at the Lubrecht Forest in forestry summer camp. We would oftentimes go across the highway to the post-office, pick up mail, and I can't remember the postmistress's name, but she was just the sweetest lady in the history of the world. And then as soon as class was over for the day, we would walk down to the Blackfoot River, Hap & Lilia's Bar on the river. Yes, yes. We always joked—of course all of us were under age then—the cool thing was, if you could get up on a stool and reach the bar, and put your money on the bar, you got served.

BM: Well, Lubrecht has a lot of memories for me too, because that's where I did my first cross country ski races. It was a great place to explore, and the trails around there, and the services there that they have to the educational programs. Now it's been a great, great place there. Lubrecht. Right. So that's a neat memory. All right.

KP: Yeah. And we got invited over to Charles Lindbergh's brother who had a ranch, adjoining Lubrecht.

BM: It was actually Land Lindbergh was his name. Yes. And I believe he was. I thought he was the son of Charles Lindbergh. Now I might be wrong there. Yeah. And his grandchildren—Peter, and I forget her name—they were my same age.

And so, Greenough had a tiny one room school, and Potomac would have annual track meets either at Greenough, or at Potomac usually Greenough. So, I have memories of competing against those folks from the tiny little one room school of Greenough. That's a neat memory. Thank you for bringing that one up for me.

KP: Yeah, it was a formative time in my life. Anyway, before we run I, asked you a question a couple of days ago. And I'm going to throw it out again, for you to think about and share with us at the end of today. And for everyone else to think about. The question that I want you to think about and respond to. When you look back at all the lookout people that you've associated with over the years, is there a characteristic that commonly stands out among them and appeals to you that you may well have made part of your adult world? So, you can share the answer to that at the end? If you care, too?

BM: Well, you know, actually Kjell since you mentioned that, I did have two answers. And I thought I would do one now and maybe one at the end.

KP: Perfect go with it.

BM: I think that the first one has to do with a type of resilience that comes with people who have been on their own on top of a lookout tower having to make do with what they have. I think that taught me a lot about really just being fine with what you have at that moment. And I think that that is invaluable, because in this age where we have so many things at our disposal, that when we are in a position that we may not have all these infinite resources, to have that ability to make the best of what you have. Be resilient in that way is what I valued from my lookout experience and what I've seen in other lookout people, people that I've met and that I will be sharing with you and that I met through the airwaves on lockouts. So, thanks, Kjell, I think that's a great question. And I have some more thoughts on that, so cue me at the end for the other part.

KP: Well, help me.

BM: Okay.

KP: And then a few days ago, and you can address this now or later if you want to. But if you do, days ago, when we were talking, you shared with me what participating in our oral history project means to you and your family. Do you want to?

BM: Yeah, I'll take that on now. Because when I was reflecting on what I wanted to talk about in this conversation, I realized just how powerful my lookout experiences are for my whole family, because it was our summers as far as my sister, my mother, my dad and I everything was built around the lookout experience, and we have so many good memories of that. It's just part of who we are and the fabric of what our lives were for the seventies in the eighties. And it still is now just because of Dad's volunteer experiences, now that he's well into his eighties, and still connected to the lookouts, and, and wanting to be part of the lookout experience. I feel this pull to go back to lookouts at some point in my life. And in whatever capacity it may be. Right now, I'm too busy trying to cover lots of ground in the wilderness, on foot. And so, I'm pulled to explore so much, but I do know that there will be a time where I'll be much more content to actually sit on top of the lookout and to do those activities that I found so much meaning in the

early part of my life. So, for me, it was just a lot of time to really reflect and to think as a young child, but also as a young man. I read some very powerful books when I was on the lookout. That still influenced me today. So, there's a lot of layers to that question. And you really, really triggered some great memories and thoughts on that.

KP: That's cool. Thanks for sharing that. And I will warn you now, that pull never goes away.

BM: I agree.

KP: You'll be back. You'll be back on the mountaintop one of these days. It just never goes away.

BM: I do believe that. I do believe it.

KP: Okay, so if you're ready, we can launch into more of your lookout history. From what I have, so far, I think we're looking at about twelve years, is that right, that you started out as a five-year-old and then went on into young adultery?

BM: Yeah, yeah. I'll say confidently that there was no adultery when I was on the lookout.

KP: I'm sorry. The floor is yours again. Okay.

BM: Well, the first year that I was on the lookout was the summer of 1972 as a five-year-old, since my birthday falls in November. That was just about before I was six. And so, I was an old five-year-old. Dad thought I was old enough to join him on the lookout and that I wasn't going to be too much work for him, though I know I kept him busy. Dad was working on Blue Mountain Lookout as the relief for the main lookout person there. And then he also did relief work for the person on Mormon Peak and eventually Sliderock Lookout. Blue Mountain overlooks the city of Missoula. Mormon Peak is at the base of Lolo Peak. It's kind of on a spur ridge. And you could see the Mormon Peak clearly from Blue Mountain. And then Sliderock Lookout was down in the southern part of the Lolo National Forest in the Rock Creek area. And it was kind of an island unit, if you will, for Lolo National Forest. And that was the only lookout tower that really monitored that area.

I want to talk about each of those lookouts specifically as it comes up through the timeframe and the timeline. But those first years were following Dad around and in those different places. In that was 1972 and 1973. And then in 1974 and 75 Dad was working as a Prevention Tech doing recreation area patrol, so he would drive the whole length of Rock Creek in a day checking on all the different campgrounds. I wasn't really part of that experience because I couldn't be with him at that time. But then from 1976 to '79, I was aged nine to twelve. I was on Blue Mountain Lookout primarily with him because he was the main person on Blue Mountain Lookout. And then again jumping through the whole timeframe and then going back into details.

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In 1985, I started working for the district fire crew at the end of the season. I'd turned eighteen the year before or so. But I'd been working another summer job. But at the end of the year, my Dad was able to connect me with well, I knew all the people that worked at the Forest Service and the Lolo, and so they knew my experience. They thought it was only appropriate that I jump in at the end of the season when they needed some extra people on the fire crew. I wasn't fighting fires, I was basically doing trail clearing and thinning work for forest projects. I worked a little bit in '85. And then in 1986, I was trained as a firefighter on the district crew for Missoula. And then in 1987, I was on the hotshot crew, the Lolo Hot Shots. And, then in 1988, to '89, I was the relief lookout for Dad on Blue Mountain Lookout. And then I was also serving as a Prevention Tech, which I'll go over a little bit more details on that. Then there was another jump in 1997, where I was the relief lookout during one summer of graduate school. And I did the relief lookout work for Blue Mountain. Once briefly for Morrell Mountain. I did some work on West Fork Butte, even though it wasn't an official lookout; it was more of a rental at that time. And then I trained some people up on Union Peak Lookout for the State because they needed some help. They were doing some collaborative work with US Forest Service. So the State asked the Forest Service if there was somebody that could train some folks, and in since Union Peak overlooked the Potomac Valley, I knew the area very well. And I could train what it was like to be on a lookout but also knew the area well enough to point out landmarks that the person needed to know.

I'm bouncing around a little bit, but I think I want to get on now to some stories of the early years, unless you have some specific questions that you want me to answer.

KP: Okay, don't step on the brakes. Keep going.

BM: Okay.

So Blue Mountain Lookout is where I have most of my lookout memories, because I spent the most of the time there. And as I learned from Dad for this interview, Blue Mountain Lookout was a unique, one-of-a-kind type of lookout. Apparently, it was built for the movie Red Skies over Montana and it was put on Davis Point first. And the way it was designed was to look more like an observation tower for aircraft on my understanding, and so had a flat top. So it really didn't fit into any specific category. Now I should reference Ray Kresek's book. I did not have access to that before. And he may actually give a classification for the Blue Mountain Lookout style or design. But I do believe that it was a rather unique one. And I haven't seen any one quite like it in our area. Have either of you seen anything quite like Blue Mountain Lookout?

(BH): I've not been there. I do have Ray Kresek sitting here. I could just see what he says about it.

BM: Yeah, why don't you do that while I'm talking? That would be great. So, what was unique about Blue Mountain is it had lots of visitors. Those visitors could drive a twelve-mile dirt road from Missoula all the way up to the summit and right to the lookout. So that meant a lot of

people would come up. But then there was of course, a number of people who were too afraid to climb the tower. So they would stay below, but we would get you know anywhere from fifty to sixty in a day, sometimes it seemed like in the later years. On the weekends. I would say more like twenty-five per day during the week day. We had one or two occasions where we had close to one hundred when buses would come up there with groups.

But Blue Mountain also had a pretty unique setup in that there was an observatory that the University of Montana owned that was just, you know, three hundred yards from the lookout. And that observatory was used for looking at the stars, but my time there in the '70s and the '80s. It was used primarily in the shoulder seasons when the lookout wasn't up there, and that's partly because of lighting issues, you know; it's too much light here in the summertime. So, I never got a chance to go into it. But in later years, that ownership of that observatory was turned over to, I believe, a private group, or at least a nonprofit of some sort. And then they started having public viewing sessions there. And Dad was able to participate in those and see like the rings of Saturn and other cool things like that, from a very powerful telescope that was in that observatory.

The thing that Dad told me about as a youngster being up on the lookout, is that I apparently I loved entertaining visitors. And I would proudly tell them about all the different landmarks you know, pointing out different peaks, different key things in Missoula that you could see, telling them stories about fun things that had happened, wildlife that we had seen.

And speaking of which, to go into the segue on that the wildlife that I did see on that was, you know, I saw basically everything that a typical lookout would see like the deer, the elk, lots of ground squirrels. But I do very clearly remember one time, it was a calm day, middle of the day. And I just had this strange feeling that something was walking up to the lookout, and I looked out and there was a mountain lion walking underneath the lookout. It was very fascinating to me that I had this intuition to look when I did, because it was completely silent. And it was just moving right through the area. And it had no interest in the lookout. But I happened to get up at that time to look at the right time to see it. And then, other memories that I have driving up to the lookout, I did see a bobcat and but I couldn't differentiate whether it was a bobcat or a lynx because it was a very quick glance at it. Didn't see if it had tufts on its ears. But yeah, so the thing with the wildlife, the gophers were my entertainment as a kid because I would take up boxes or buckets of rocks up to the forty-foot-high catwalk and I would throw rocks at the gophers, never hitting them. You know, I don't think I ever killed a golfer in my life or in that period of time in my life. But I sure I had a lot of fun trying to get them, and then the other thing that I would do up there. I made paper airplanes and different designs of paper airplanes, fly them off there and then see which one could stay in the air the longest. Use different kinds of weighting systems and paper clips on the underside of them. It was fun. It was it was a lot of fun to design those. Dad helped me with those things. Other things that Dad helped me remember that I'd love to do is I would play with Lincoln Logs and he taught me how to make hooked rugs. Those rugs burned up in the house fire of 1990. But we had a lot of those little artifacts I probably would be carting around to this day if we hadn't had a house fire.

I also developed a love for reading. And early on, I would read dog stories. I just was fascinated by dog stories. There was an author by the name of Albert Payson Terhune, who wrote stories about collies that caught my interest. And then later it was sled dog stories. So, I loved reading about works by Jack London, and [Farley Mowat's] *Never Cry Wolf*. And then I found another author whose name forgets me, but I would read about the north. And so, for me, Alaska became the place that I wanted to go as I was sitting on top of the wonderful lookouts in Montana. I was dreaming of Alaska. But since then, I've discovered Montana is better than Alaska. In my opinion.

BH: I looked up Ray Kresek. For people who don't know who he is, he is the author of *Fire Lookouts of the Pacific Northwest* and basically the guru for anything lookouts here. He does say that Blue Mountain is different as you say: in 1966, a forty-one-foot TT tower. That means treated timber, I believe, I'm not sure, with non-typical slant, windowed flat cap.

BM: I think that was the key thing, was the non-typical windows is because they were slanted inwards, and they were big panels. As Kjell has in his picture behind his head, that's a look like a flat top lookout but with many small pane windows, and not slanted. So that particular design really made it nice because it did cut down the glare. And it made it I think cooler in the summertime as well, because it had a little bit more shading from the roof.

But back to life at Blue Mountain. One of the things that Dad and I would do in the evenings at the right time of the year, which was typically August is we would go down and pick huckleberries. And Dad was a master of huckleberry pies, particularly huckleberry peach pies. And to this day, there's hardly anything that beats a good huckleberry peach pie from Dad. Because dad also knows how to make crusts particularly well, so they're very flaky and delicious. And then the contents of huckleberries and peaches, Oh, perfect. So, we would do some hikes in the evening around the lookout. And I think that helped me get the hiking bug early on, gave me the confidence to know I can go hiking.

Which reminds me of another story. Dad never had an interest in backpacking. And at that time, Mom was too busy with tending to the garden in the house to be interested in backpacking. But I was really interested in figuring this stuff out, because I read survival stories as well as one of my entertainment things. We had a cousin, Mark, who was visiting from Pennsylvania, and Mark and I wanted to go backpacking. So, we looked at the map, and we figured we could leave from Blue Mountain Lookout and walk down to a creek along a logging road. And we would set up camp. And dad just let us figure out everything ourselves. And when he looked at what we packed, which was cans of soup and cans of beans and sardine cans and all that stuff. And he just chuckled. And I said, Sure, go ahead. Oh yeah, loaded up our packs, and I was probably I don't know, maybe fourteen at the time, and he was sixteen. And we had heavy packs on and walked down the mountain and found this logging road with a tree across it. And we were going to make our own shelter. So, we cut the limbs and just made it a frame against the downed tree and built ourselves a nice fire and then started eating all our canned

foods, which we had to get rid of a lot of canned food if we're going to make it up the hill. But needless to say, the uphill part was still pretty strenuous.

When I was nine years old, Dad started teaching me how to cook on lookouts. And we first started on an old-style wood cookstove and I think you probably have seen those before. They're just these beautiful antiques nowadays. But they had a firebox in one side and then the cooktop and then oven underneath. And Dad taught me how to get the fires right with that. Move the pots around on the different parts of the wood stove.

But as you can imagine some summers, if you get a little warm and, you know, having to cook on that cookstove wasn't the best thing. So, we did have propane backup. And we would use that more often than not, but I developed a love for cooking and dad was really great and patient because he had all the time in the world, so he would just turn me loose on designing the meals before we went up on the lookout and then we'd go shopping together and then when we were up there, he helped me with the details of it. But I learned on my own, how to cook with spices. Mom wasn't big on spices. So, I would bring up huge elaborate collection of spices and make foods that some would probably make you throw up. But other ones were pretty tasty, so I got an understanding of how things work together and cooking. And to this day, cooking is fun and creative to me, and I enjoy it. Thanks to those early years on the lookout.

I'm gonna go through some random memories of those earlier stages on that, and just kind of hit on different things. And then I'm gonna go through some stories about my fire crew years, because I think those are interesting and relevant to this conversation. Before I get into those, do you have any specific questions, or I'm heading in the right direction for you?

KP: No, I think you're doing fine. Brian, I did. A thought came to my mind that if your Dad made huckleberry peach pies on those old wood cook stove, you had to know how to make pies on those babies.

BM: Yeah, it was an art; you had to get that temperature right in the oven, and you had to keep rotating things. And yeah, you learned to be patient and being patient on the lookout makes sense, Because he got time. So that worked really well. All right, yes.

(BH): Did you have any problems baking bread, I talked with a couple of people in interviews who, me had similar problems, but different lookouts and different times where they were baking bread, and it seemed like only half of the stove would work, so they'd have half a baked loaf. Whatever.

Did you have anything like that?

BM: Yes, definitely. We definitely had to rotate everything all the time. And that was what Dad taught me was like, you can do really good cooking with on a stove, if you just know how to stay with it. And you can't just plop it in the oven. You got to give you got to keep it moving, keep it

rotating, know how the kind of the idiosyncrasies of that particular oven are. Each of those ovens had a personality that you've learned. And, and that was the art. And now you really understood the art of it. I had a great aunt, Sadie Kaufman, who lived in the Swan Valley, and she cooked on one of those stoves until she had to move out in her '80s. She was a master of that. And it was just fun to see her cook on that stove.

That stove on Blue Mountain Lookout unfortunately was vandalized. Being so close to Missoula, there was always problems with vandalism on Blue Mountain. And one year we came up there, that whole beautiful cookstove had been thrown off the lookout. And it was in pieces down below. Now what would possess somebody to do that? I don't know. And there were always windows shot out, things like that. But that was at a time when they didn't gate the road where they do now. Right now, it is gated about a couple miles down the road at a logical spot that where the main the lookout road turns off from the main road. And, and since they've done that gating, there's been a lot less vandalism, but it used to be that people could drive to a gate, but they could see the lookout so they would just walk on up. And that was a problem.

In fact, one of my early experiences too, was in the let's see, it would have been 1976, I think, it was around that time. We still had the old crank phone up on Blue Mountain Lookout. And that's how we could still call anywhere in the United States with it. So first, the background on that story: that old crank phone would connect to an operator in Missoula. Frequently the operator would pick up and say, where are you? Wait, what's Where's Blue Mountain Lookout? And of course, we would have to give them the phone number of where we wanted to talk and then they would punch it in and we would talk.

Well, apparently around that time there was some folks who were threatening to blow up government installations. And there was an alert that came out earlier, like a week or two before that there was this random threat that was given to the Forest Service.

Well, wouldn't you know it, one night, when Dad and I were up there, we didn't close the trapdoor on the place because we never had problems with people visiting at night. But we did lock the door to the lookout itself. Well, in the middle of the night, a whole group of people come up to the lookout. And they are drunker than a skunk most of them and they climb on up the lookout. And we didn't have the trapdoor down. So, they came up to the catwalk and they're peering in there banging on the window, saying and "what are you doing in there." And I was pretty nervous in bed there and watching Dad, and Dad was there. I didn't say much to them. But then when they went down the catwalk, he got on the old crank phone and got to the sheriff's department. They said, "You know what the threats have been recently?" and he says, "You better believe I know what the threats are." And they said, "Well, you stay on the phone." And so, these people then came back up the catwalk, saw Dad on the phone, and they said, "Oop, we better get out of here." So, they had a headed down while the sheriff was coming on up the road. And apparently the sheriff stopped twelve different vehicles on the way up as he was heading on up the road and stopped and talked to each one of them. And of course, none of them confessed to being anywhere up in the lookout. They were just people

having a good time, but it sure gave Dad and I a big scare. And from then on, we kept the trapdoor closed.

But Dad even has stories of people climbing around the trapdoor which would involve a lot of exposure. And that would be very nerve racking. And people would climb around that closed trapdoor in the offseason and get up there and vandalize things. So, vandalism on Blue Mountain was a bad problem. But since they've gated it, interestingly, it's not been used, and it hasn't been shot up. And it's in a lot better condition after multiple years of without use, from what I understand, in conversations with Dad.

So those were some early, scary memories of being on the lookout, but I don't have much trauma associated with that.

Things that I do remember, of good memories that I have. Dad would have these late evening conversations on the Forest Service radios with other lookouts. The people that I remember him talking to in particular were Virginia Vincent on Stark Mountain, Virginia had a very familiar handle when she did check ins because she would go "Staraaaark Lookout." And forever, I would think of that mountain as "Staaaaark." And other folks like Alan Rogers, who was on Williams Peak Lookout and then later, Eddie Peake, way up in Thompson Falls area. It was hard to get him consistently. But what they would do sometimes is they would have us call into public radio on the request hour late at night, and they'd have us dial in their requests of classical music that they wanted to hear on the radio. So, we could do that for them.

Other things I remember, is learning how to read a Forest Service map, Dad spent a lot of time with me, whenever there was a fire or whenever there's was any other activity, he would teach me how to look at, you know, that generic Forest Service map that only had peaks and streams on it. But based on the peaks and streams, he could help me identify the areas that I was looking, so that I learned how to get a picture - a three-dimensional picture - in my mind just from the Forest Service map. And I think that's where my love of maps started, and it still is. I can spend hours just looking at maps. In fact, when I'm hiking in the backcountry, I don't carry a book, I just look at maps. And the maps take me on adventures in places that I just want to go sometime or dream of going. But it gives me a visualization of what it's like in that area just by looking at even a Forest Service map. And so later in the years, I took pride in being able to call in fires in the quarter of the quarter section. When looking at a section, and township and range on a fire. And, you know, sometimes I'd be off what but they would let me know. But it was great to see just how close I could get them to that fire, even though they could clearly see it before they needed to have been needed to have that level of detail.

So, other things I learned to do was reading clouds. First, I took a real fascination in clouds, Dad would have a cloud chart, and he would help me to understand what the different clouds indicated as possible weather systems coming. We would also take humidity with the wet bulb and dry bulb. And I'm not sure you guys have had experience with that. Did you ever take weather with wet bulb and dry bulb?

KP: Yes.

BM: Yeah. And, and then learning to differentiate water dogs from smoke. And I do admit, there was one time I called in a water dog. Gotta confess those things. Even with all those years of experience, I did call in a water dog.

KP: I think there's no lookout. in existence that hasn't called in a water dog. And probably my favorite cloud was always the cumulus overtimeous. [BM and BH laugh]

BM: That's great. Well, I do know one time in, this would have been—probably get the timeline right—1988. That was the year of the big fires, and big fires in Yellowstone. But on specific to Blue Mountain, there was a lightning storm that went through in June. And it struck the top of Black Mountain, Black Mountain was a small peak that was just below Blue Mountain, and it was probably about two to three air miles away. I'd have to go look at the map to get that straight, but it was pretty close. And I saw a puff of smoke go up. So, I called dispatch and reported it. And they sent a helicopter over and by the time the helicopter got up, they couldn't see anything. And then four weeks later, I saw a puff of smoke in the same spot in the morning. And I called in, they sent a helicopter up, but couldn't find it by the time they got there. Six weeks later, a puff of smoke came up. But this was more like a column. I called them in, they sent a helicopter up, and said, “Oh yeah, got a fire going there.” And they landed and at that point that fire had crawled around for six weeks in the duff. And it was over an acre in size just from that smoldering for that six week. And that, again taught me just how in this particular area, how fire can be so persistent and it can still creep along for long periods of time.

And that reminds me of another story. I love fire. And when I was a kid, it was January in Potomac and we had twenty-two acres, and I love starting fires and Dad says, “Sure, you can go ahead and do whatever you want out there.” So, I found a stump, and I started a fire and this was you know beginning of January and I don't know made marshmallows or cooked something on it and played in the woods and then let the fire go. Just I didn't put it out because there was snow all around, so I didn't have to worry. And we went through a cold snap where it got down to twenty below and that fire smoldered in that stump for a couple of weeks in the middle of winter. And that again kind of illustrated to me the power of fire in in the rotted timber and in the understory, so that when I did become a firefighter, I could understand why they really wanted us to dig down to mineral soil whenever we were making a fire line.

So, going back to lookout memories. I do remember a fire I saw which was about ten air miles from the Blue Mountain Lookout. We had some family friends visiting. I was married at that time because I was in graduate school. One of Heidi's cousins was visiting, and I was watching an area where there was a logging project and it was pretty dry right at that time of the year. I saw smoke start up and called it in right away because I knew it was really dry. They need to get on that right away, and within ten minutes, that thing had ripped ten acres. And I don't know if it burned over vehicles or not. But I do know that that logging operation wasn't the same

logging operation after that. And that gave me a real firsthand experience on just how fast fires can move. But I also had some experience with that, in fighting fires earlier before that particular story.

And oh, boy, I'm just gonna keep jumping around with stories, please feel free to interrupt

BH: Great.

BM: One of the lookout stories that I have goes back to the '90s, when I was really taking a hankering to lookouts. I wanted to hike to as many different lookouts as I could find. The abandoned ones were interesting to me, as well as the ones that were manned. And my mother, Myrtle, was also very much into hiking by that time. We took a hike in the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area to Boulder Mountain Lookout. And that was pretty much dead middle of the wilderness area so it was very remote. When we got up to that lookout, we discovered that it really hadn't been maintained. The windows were gone out of it, the shell was still there. But the lightning net was still there. So, the lightning net is that copper wire that comes down on each corner of the lookout, and it comes to a peak at the roof of the lookout so in case lightning strikes then lookout it directs it all to the ground. Well, earlier in that summer, I had been on West Fork Butte Lookout. And I was helping to put it back together after they had done some remodeling of it. They had painted it, but the lightning net hadn't been put up yet. And nobody was taking that very seriously. And I had tried to put the lightning net back up and discovered it was missing a few key points or parts. Well, when I was up on the Boulder Mountain Lookout I saw, "Hey, there's a lightning net, that's completely intact, I think I'm going to take some of these parts that I need. Because I don't think this lookout is something to be worried about anymore." So, without any Forest Service permission, I took these parts, and I transferred them over to West Fork Butte Lookout, feeling that I was justified in doing so because the West Fork Butte Lookout was a forest, a US Forest rental and if that didn't have a proper lightning net on it, when somebody was in there, that would be a very bad thing if lightning struck it. So, I felt justified in stealing from one place and putting it on the other. But I did it without permission. And three years later, or maybe more, the Boulder Mountain Lookout burned completely in one of the hot fires that burned in the Rattlesnake during the early 2000s. So, I don't have any regrets of stealing that lightning net.

And, okay, I'm going to go on to some stories of fighting fires. First on the District crew, then the Hotshot crew. And then some of my Prevention Tech years, look out relief years. And then some other stories at the end of all that. So how are we doing for time for everybody?

KP: Well, we're at an hour now, Brian. So, if you have plenty of stories yet, we can bring this to a halt and schedule a second interview, no problem on our end., I want to capture as much as you care to share. So, it's up to you we should we try to hold everything in an hour or an hour and ten minutes or so. So, if you've got more to share with us, we can wrap anytime for this first session and schedule a return. It's up to you.

BM: Well, why not? This would be a logical place to wrap it up. Because then the next the following stories will probably take less than an hour, but they're the kind of stories I think that create a picture of what life is like on lookouts and on fire crews in what is now becoming ancient history. I guess I'm graying and becoming part of the dinosaur group. So, it may be interesting to some down the line to hear these old stories.?

KP: Well, I certainly want to capture that. And I have to tell you that during the last hour and ten minutes or so, I saw your aura, go from something in the fifty-year-old range back down to twenty years old, I just saw that transformation in your face.

BM: Thank you, Kjell. So, it definitely is fun to relive these things. And it's just great to have the sense that there's somebody that might be interested in these stories, and you know, for anything, I see it as something for my family. And these these things will be something my family can check back in on and to know what the life of Dad, eventually Grandpa, mentally eventually great grandpa – who knows? So I'm very thankful that you're giving me this chance to talk about these things. So yeah, I think we can reschedule. I'm okay.

KP: Okay. So, um, do you want to answer the second part of the question here at the end of today?

BM: Sure. You know, I think the other part of being a lookout is having a bit of an introverted side to yourself, in other words, to be very easily entertained with your own thoughts, and to be comfortable with yourself. I think that it is so important to have that ability to be self-reflective. I've always valued that, and lookouts give you that chance to do that. And pretty much every lookout person I've met, seems to have that quality about them. They have the willingness to, and the comfort to just be alone, be with themselves, and to be in their own thoughts. And which I will say as a young adult, that gave me some opportunity to read some very well thought-provoking books like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig. I can remember that reading that on the lookout, and so that, that gave me the opportunity to really reflect on a lot of different things that I think lookouts as a whole tend to do. So yeah, that answers at least that part of the question.

KP: Cool. That was very insightful to me. And I seem to resemble both of those answers.

BM: I Believe that.

KP: Beth, do you want to offer something in closing here for this session?

BH: The only thing that I mean, I'm in there too, with you guys, you know, feeling the same way about being on lookouts. But I guess one of the things that I'm picking up from your interview is just the closeness between you and your dad, and how much he taught you and how much you appreciated being the son that had a father to, you know, offer up these wonderful things. And I want to learn how to bake a pie from him. Or you—or you.

BM: No, no, I'm not the pie baker that Dad is. Unfortunately, in our family, Dad has those skills, and he's the only one with those skills. So, when he passes on, we're going to have to work hard to try to reproduce that. So, you should take advantage of that as soon as you can.

No, you're right, Beth, the one-on-one time with my dad gave me a connection and a bond with him that as an adult now I truly understand and appreciate. At the time, you take it for granted. And, and so I think now, like just even preparing for this interview, Dad's amazing memory about all these experiences blew me away. And he was so helpful for me to reconnect and then paint in my mind what my experiences were like. Because after all, memory is just a construct. And a construct that we have that is accurate and sometimes a little bit colored by the lens through which we look at life now. So those accuracies may get stretched a little bit, but they still are important in that having Dad to share those ideas and those thoughts with me helped to freshen up what they mean to me now. So, I do appreciate my relationship with Dad now and also the opportunity to have this project to reconnect with him.

KP: Well, and I have to say that I didn't really know you at all prior to this. I got to spend a lot of time with your Dad during the interviews and while volunteering on lookouts, but it's very obvious after spending this time with you, that you are his son. And that's offered as a compliment. And you should take it that way.

BM: Thank you Kjell.

KP: And just to kind of wrap I feel very privileged that you agreed to sit down with us and share that part of your life. I think we got a glimpse into your soul that hardly ever do we ever get with another individual. So as soon as we close here, we'll schedule the second interview. And then you'll be stacked in with your dad on our website when we get that submitted to the University. Yeah, so really appreciate the time. And my mind. My mind is going like a thousand miles an hour now to try to see where we're gonna go on the next session. Thank you.

BM: Thank you.

BH: Thanks, Brian.