

**Oral History Number: 163-018**

**Interviewee: Leland L. "Lee" Miller**

**Interviewer: Rosa Stone**

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**Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project**

Rosa Stone: This is a historical recording. Rosa Stone interviewing—

Leland Miller: Lee Miller.

RS: And we're going to have some background noise, so we'll speak pretty loudly right into the tape recorder here.

LM: Okay.

RS: Lee, you came from one of the peace churches, did you, and getting your 4-E classification was pretty automatic.

LM: That's true. Came from a Mennonite community in South Dakota that was very well established. Pretty large community. So well-established that I really was pretty protected and it was actually easier for me to go as a CO [conscientious objector] than it would have been to go into the military because all the neighbors around us supported us and that stand. We did have classes in church, taught by the minister, when it became apparent that we might get involved in war. Where the Mennonite Church stood in regard to the non-resistant stand, as we called it in the Mennonite Church.

RS: So you had no problems. The draft board said okay.

LM: Right. We had no problems.

RS: Where were you first sent and how many transfers did you have?

LM: I was sent to Weeping Water, Nebraska. In September, as I recall. In late December there was a sign up for a new camp at LaPine, Oregon. I recall there were about a train, a car load, 30-some people from Weeping Water that signed up LaPine. We arrived in LaPine either December or January, I'm not—

RS: In what year?

LM: Well I think it must have been in December. That would have been in 1942. I was there for 14 months, and then the LaPine camp closed as a Mennonite camp and became a government camp. I was one of the last to leave LaPine, and a few of the government people were coming in. But that's just about the time we left. I understand there were some fun things that

happened after that. But anyway, I was sent to Terry, Montana. I already had my application in for smokejumpers at La Pine, as I recall. And during the three months or so that I was at Terry I got my call to go smokejumpers.

RS: What was it that intrigued you about smokejumpers? Why did you sign up for—?

LM: Well, I guess I always had a little sense of adventure, for one thing, and I think that probably all of us were a little bit influenced in that we wanted to prove that conscientious objectors were not there because they were yellow, or whatever.

RS: So this had enough risk and danger built right in.

LM: Yeah.

RS: Looked worthwhile.

LM: Looked like a very worthwhile thing. La Pine, incidentally, was in the woods and I had, in the 14 months there, had grown to love the woods and working in the woods and I think this also had an influence.

RS: So you got here and you did your training where, then?

LM: Did our training at Ninemile. This was for the '44 season, and stayed over for the '45. I made all my practice jumps out of Ninemile, as I recall.

RS: And how many jumps did you make in all?

LM: I ended up with 19 jumps.

RS: For both seasons?

LM: Yeah. Seven training jumps the first year, two refresher jumps, so I had a total of 10 fire jumps.

RS: Ten fire jumps. And not every fire was alike, is that right?

LM: No, they were definitely not alike. I think that I was somewhat fortunate, in not getting on a real big fire. I guess, a certain standard one, anyway. I didn't get on any of the really big fires that exploded, real large ones that called for lots of people to come in. Jumped on quite a number of two-man fires. My first one was a two-man fire that I remember quite well. I jumped with Leonhart Bartel. And he was an experienced guy who had been in the year before. Never did have any problems. Never got hurt. Everything went just great. I have the one regret: I wish I'd have kept a daily diary and written down everything, because I'm finding now that all these

beautiful places I was at and enjoyed, I don't know where they're at anymore. I'm thinking that maybe I can do some research in Missoula, with the forest service, and discover where some of those places were. So I may look into that.

RS: There may be someone who kept a log.

LM: Yeah, well I think the forest service probably does have record of the personnel on every fire that they kept record on. So I'm going to do some research on that. I think it'd be tremendously interesting.

RS: Now that it's 40 years in the rear and you're retired, you have time to look into it.

LM: Right.

RS: What was the longest fire you were on, would you say? Was it a week long?

LM: Well, that's one of the things I can't really answer. I don't recall. I don't think I was ever on a fire that long. I think probably about three days was the longest.

RS: And then did you have to pack out from some of these, did you take all your gear with you, or did the mule trains come in and pick up your materials?

LM: As far as I recall, they virtually always sent in a pack train to come in and get our gear out. I do remember lots of long hikes out. I know there were several fires that required a 20-mile hike to get back out. I think it was one of the first fires we hiked out to the Bungalow [Idaho] ranger station, and there were several others that were on the west side of the Bitterroots or the Clearwater or the Saint Joe, or wherever, and we ended up—. One time I recall being trucked out after we hiked out, we were trucked from there to Grangeville. We caught the bus from there to Spokane, and rode the train from Spokane back to Missoula. So we travelled 5-, 600-miles after jumping on a fire that was probably 60 or 70 miles from Missoula in the first place. I guess this gives a little indication of the value of smokejumping and the ability to get to that fire fairly soon. But after the fire, it was a long ways back.

RS: Yeah. Long ways back. The value of smokejumping—you had two-man fires because you could get there soon enough that it only took two men. Otherwise, without the ability to fly in there, they would have taken a lot of men to control that same fire probably.

LM: Yeah. It was, of course, one of the things that you didn't know. Most of the fires were lightning caused, and if the fire happened to be near the top of a ridge and there was no particular danger of it spreading a lot, okay, maybe it would have gone out by itself. But maybe it wouldn't have. So these were the things that were the unknowns, and without question there were a great many acres that were saved because of the quick arrival. Most fires, if they were

lightning caused, started out with one tree. So if you could get there and catch that one tree, great. Once a fire grew to be over an acre in size, you have a job on your hands. Lots of work.

RS: And, with no longer than three days on the fire, you probably didn't get too hungry, even with the kind of food you brought along. Did they drop food for you, as a rule?

LM: Well, we had, on those smaller fires, we used K-rations quite a lot, as I recall.

RS: And you didn't object to those?

LM: No, I didn't think they were too bad. I don't know of anyone that was real enthused about them, but we were kind of given some compensation when we could get back out to the ranger station, or whatever.

RS: They'd cook you good meals.

LM: They have a tremendous feed. Forest service food was always fantastic, to my way of thinking.

RS: Partly because you were young, strong, healthy, and getting a lot of vigorous exercise. You probably ate pretty good.

LM: Yeah, I think so.

RS: Good appetite. Even though you were not injured, you did not have to help carry someone out, or...were there other injuries?

LM: No. No, I don't remember having to. Didn't get involved in any of that. Just a matter of coincidence, I suppose.

RS: And what other projects did you do, in between times, when...I'm not sure if it's being—

LM: Let's sit down. At the table.

RS: Why don't you go ahead and tell about your projects.

LM: Well one of the things you did was make hay for the Remount station. They had lots of mules. That was one of the activities. I remember building some fences. We were on a fence-fixing project when Ed Carlson made his famous headlong jump, and his static line jumped off the wire in the plane, and wondered what that was. We found out later that day what that was.

RS: You saw that.

LM: Yeah, we saw that. In the season between the '44 and '5 season, I spent that winter at Kingston, Idaho, with three other fellows, and we did lots of timber cruising, we hung some telephone wires. Then after my refresher course in 1945, I was sent out to Big Prairie ranger station for six weeks to clear trails. We lived in a little cabin for a while, way out, and lived in a tent in another site for [unintelligible]. It was a good experience. I was newly married at that point, and that kind of detracted from the wilderness experience, but—

RS: What were you planning to do before the war came along, and what were you planning to do in life? What kind of occupation?

LM: Well, I was born and raised on a farm, and raising dairy cattle, and I was involved in the 4-H club up until age 20. And so that was my main interest, at that point. And I, kind of assuming nothing else interfered, I probably would have ended up making that my life's occupation.

RS: But this did kind of interfere.

LM: Oh yes. This definitely had quite an impact. After they'd seen Paris, and all of that kind of thing—

RS: Right. You don't go back to the farm.

LM: Right.

RS: So what did you end up doing, all these years?

LM: Well, the influence from back home was still pretty strong. And after CPS years, we did go back and farm. We farmed for nine years, my wife and I. But I guess there was a little something telling us we didn't have to do this, and the financial situation being what it was, we were renting and had really no foreseeable way of buying a farm. We decided to do something else. And that something else turned out to be working with heavy equipment. That was one of the things that came out of CPS—I learned to run heavy equipment. A dozer and that kind of thing. So even while I was farming, I did some work with heavy equipment. Dozer work and scraper work for soil conservation service.

So in 1955, the interstate program began to take shape, and so I went down to the Caterpillar dealership and I applied for a job, and they could use me, they said, so I went to work for them in November of 1955. I worked with them for a little over 10 years, in South Dakota, is where this was, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. We made a trip in 1965 to the west coast, and came through Missoula, and north Idaho, and went on to the coast—Oregon—and were once again impressed with this Northwest. And we really never had gotten it thoroughly out of our blood, and this reminder, we decided, it's now or never. I was already in the 40s, as far as age goes. It happened that the dealer in Spokane, Washington, put an ad in the Sioux Falls paper, looking for help. That they were very busy up here, building dams on the Snake River, logging was going

very hot and heavy, and highway construction. All snowballing. And so I answered the application and their service manager called me and said, "Get over here, we need you." They made me a good offer, and they helped us make the move. So I worked for the dealer in Spokane for another 19 years. Ended up with almost 29 years of working with the heavy equipment, and I did field service work for most of that time. Had a service [unintelligible] shop on wheels, in other words, and went out to the job site where the work was. I enjoyed that because it enabled me to see the country that I really loved. I was out in the woods with the logger, and it was a good life. They treated me very well.

RS: Very good. She was your wife, then?

LM: Yes, we were married between the '44 and '45 fire season. So she got in on my second year of smokejumping. Had a job in Missoula, and I was able to stay, at times, with her. She was employed, helped a lady that had arthritis problem. She had her own room, so that was real nice.

RS: And did you like the fellows you were with, when you were in smokejumpers particularly? Did you like the group of fellows, get along with them, enjoy them?

LM: Very definitely. This is, I guess, kind of the highlight of my life because coming from the Mennonite community and becoming a CPSer in such an easy train of events, and then meeting these guys from all over the U.S., with all sorts of backgrounds, and hearing about the hardships that some of these guys had to go through to get their status was tremendously impressive to me. I consider this to be my educational years, really. I didn't go to college, but I feel like I learned a great deal from those years. Of course we really look forward to reunions and meeting some of these fellows again, even after all these years.

RS: You've been for three years, right?

LM: Right.

RS: Thank you so much. I think this is good enough, even though we had background noise. I think it will be very helpful to the research. Well, good. Thank you.

LM: Thank you.

[End of Interview]