

**Oral History Number: 163-023**

**Interviewee: Winton Stucky**

**Interviewer: Rosa Stone**

**Date of Interview: August 11, 1986**

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

Rosa Stone: This is a historical interview. Rosa Stone, interviewing...

Winton Stucky: Winton Stucky.

RS: Yes. And, to start out with Winton, let's look for a little bit at your religious background and your 4-E classification, how difficult or easy that was, or what happened to you back there.

WS: Well, I'm from the General Conference Mennonites, and I—, well, what question did you want to—

RS: Was this information all provided all provided for you, on how to get your classification as a CO?

WS: Ah, yes.

RS: You didn't have any difficulties going through this?

WS: No, I had no difficulties. I was more or less raised up in the church, in this tradition.

RS: So that when you needed to be drafted, you went with the 4-E classification.

WS: Yes.

RS: And then where were you assigned when you were—

WS: When I first went in, I went to Weeping Water, Nebraska. And then from there I went to North Fork, California. And then from there, I come in to smokejumpers.

RS: You found out that they needed smokejumpers?

WS: Yes. In Weeping Water.

RS: You already knew then.

WS: I had applied for a transfer to North Fork and I had also applied for this smokejumper unit. Then my transfer came through to North Fork, and I was transferred there, and then about a month later I was transferred—

RS: So you were only at North Fork a short while.

WS: Yeah, just a short time. Until after the season, you know, and then I went back to North Fork.

RS: After the smokejumper season.

WS: First season, yes. See, I had an injury, and then they transferred me back to North Fork and then from there I was released.

RS: What was it that appealed to you about smokejumping?

WS: Well, I guess I was young and wanted something exciting.

RS: Yes. And you found it.

WS: And I found it, yes.

RS: Now, where did you get your training when you came to smokejumpers? What year was that?

WS: 1943.

RS: The first year.

WS: Yeah. Trained at Seeley Lake.

RS: At Seeley Lake. And did you get your injury in practice jumps?

WS: Yes, it was in a practice jump. But not, not here. I was transferred with the unit to Cave Junction, Oregon. But it was in a practice jump there that I had a back injury. Fractured some vertebrae.

RS: And has that had repercussions since then?

WS: Yes. I had real repercussions. For 29 years, it kept getting progressively worse. And I went to Wichita Hospital, and also to KU Medical Center, Kansas State Medical Center, and they told me there was nothing that they could do for me, that I better prepare to go into a wheelchair. And then my wife started working at the Halstead Hospital and the new doctor came in there. He was a young fellow, he was from the Philippines, and she told him about my condition—at that time I was in bed—and he said, well, bring him up and we'll take a look at him. And so they loaded me up in the car, my sons, and took me up to Halstead and he gave me an examination.

They took x-rays, but—and then he told us what was wrong, and what he'd have to do. And we asked him his opinion, he says, "Well, I know I can't hurt him."

RS: He won't make you worse.

WS: No. "I can't hurt him anymore, but I think I can help him."

WS: So we said go on, we're ready.

RS: What did he do for you, then?

WS: See, I had the three lower vertebrae in my back were fractured, and over the 29 years they had deteriorated. And so he took all the bone he could get out of my hip and he ground it up and rebuilt the vertebrae. And the lower part of my back is...of course I can't bend, but it doesn't affect me at all, now.

RS: It's not painful.

WS: Not at all, no. My back is as strong now as it ever has been.

RS: 29 years of pain and then relief.

WS: And I was in and out of the hospital several times. My legs would go into cramps and so on.

RS: During that pain, 29—

WS: During that 29 years, yeah. I was in and out of the hospital quite often. To relieve pain. But now, my back is as strong as...I don't even feel it. I used to be able to bend over and touch the ground. Now I can't.

RS: That's a small sacrifice, isn't it?

WS: That's a small...I don't even notice it.

RS: Yes. It's not something you have to do every day. So, when you were in training, how many jumps did you make?

WS: Eleven.

RS: You made 11 in all. Now some of those were fire jumps, weren't they?

WS: One. I made one fire jump.

RS: But you were injured before the fire jump?

WS: No, after that. It was a practice jump after the fire jump.

RS: I see. Was it after the season?

WS: No. It was getting close to the end of the season, and see, if we didn't have a fire to jump on for so long, we had to make a practice jump, to keep in condition.

RS: Where was this landing?

WS: At Cave Junction, Oregon. And it was in a clearing they had there, on one of the mountains. And I had a defective chute, and it was just a hard-opening chute, and I don't know whether...We don't know whether it was the opening shock that paralyzed me or the landing, because when I landed, see, I just fell in a heap.

RS: And they think maybe the defective chute gave you too much of a jerk—

WS: A jerk, yes.

RS: —when it opened, and that you might have done the damage then already?

WS: Might have. It probably kind of paralyzed it or something, but then when I landed, why I couldn't control the roll and so on.

RS: Because you seemed to be incapacitated then already.

WS: Yes.

RS: And you couldn't get up and walk when you—

WS: No, oh no.

RS: They had to take you out by mule, then?

WS: No, we were close to a road. This was all close to road. And they just loaded me on a pickup and took me out.

RS: Were you in the hospital here then?

WS: No, at Cave Junction. I was in hospital there for about, oh, a week or so, in traction.

RS: And then got transferred back to North Fork?

WS: To North Fork, yes.

RS: And discharged from there.

WS: Yes.

RS: Those were pretty dark days.

WS: Yes they were. It was a little discouraging—I enjoyed the work. And had a nice group to work with. But that all ended, and I missed that.

RS: So you were really one of the casualties.

WS: Yes.

RS: Now, for some fellows, one says, well, looking back over what went on, would you change anything, would you go again?

WS: I would, because I enjoyed it. I mean, it was interesting work. It was hard work, but it was interesting. And I would have stayed on, if I wouldn't have had the injury. I'd have liked to have stayed on, at least for several years.

RS: You were able to walk again after being in traction?

WS: Yes. Well, yes.

RS: For a while.

WS: For a while I had to walk on crutches, and then they put me in a steel brace, and then I could walk. But I had to be real careful that I didn't step off of a curb or something. Any sudden jar would really hurt.

RS: But you resumed your life, began working. What kind of vocation did you take up then, after?

WS: I went into the grocery business. My father had a grocery store and when I was released from camp I went in business with him.

RS: Did your injury decide what you would do? Had you had other kinds of aspirations other than going into the grocery business?

WS: Well, before I was drafted, I was a fireman on the railroad at Needles, California, for Santa Fe. And then when I went to camp, my seniority went on, and I could have gone back after I was released, and I could have gone back to Santa Fe. But my father needed help at home, so I went there instead.

RS: You were one of the privileged young men, to be out, because of your release.

WS: Right.

RS: And help was scarce then.

WS: Right. It really was.

RS: So the smokejumping experience did change your vocation, but not in the—not just from the inside. It changed you because of—well, were you more able to do the grocery work than you would have the other?

WS: Well, I don't know whether I think...Well, see, on the railroad it would be mostly sitting and so on. In the grocery business, you do a lot of walking. And so maybe, the grocery business was better for me, because I had to do a lot of walking and you knew you could keep active.

RS: Kept you in shape. But after a good many years, then you did get down—

WS: I did get down to where it was really, it was painful. The last several years.

RS: And pain—people don't know pain until they've experienced it.

WS: That's right.

RS: What were some of the interesting fires that you jumped on?

WS: Well, the one I did jump on was on a mountain in Oregon. Two of us jumped on it. And it was right on top of a mountain, and there was no—well, there was a clearing, about, oh 100 feet in diameter, that we had to land in, and they dropped us over the valley. If I remember right, they dropped us from 7,500 feet, down to the valley. But it wasn't that many feet to—

RS: The mountains were up there too, but you were—

WS: Because of air currents, they dropped us over the valley and then we could move our chutes to the clearing. And we both happened to—we hit the clearing. We landed in the clearing. And of course, then we had to go and hike up to the fire and dig a line around it. It was a small fire. Lightning had evidently struck a snag, a dead tree, and we had to dig a line around

where we were going to cut down the tree, so the tree would fall within this fire line. And so we got that fire put out, and then we had to hike out.

RS: Quite a ways?

WS: We had to hike out a long ways, yes.

RS: Oh, it was a long ways then.

WS: And of course, we had to retrieve our chutes then, and get all our stuff together and then drag it down the mountain and home. It was quite an experience. But it was interesting.

RS: Was that the fire just before your practice jump, where you were injured?

WS: Yes.

RS: Was that the only fire jump that you—

WS: That's the only fire jump I got to make.

RS: That was the only...Oh, that's too bad!

WS: That's right. That's the only one. I was out on some fires, ground fires, that we hiked in.

RS: Yes. So that you were an experienced firefighter, but not an experienced jumper on fires.

WS: Yeah, right.

RS: Ok. What would you say was your most interesting experience while you were here?

WS: You mean in the smokejumping unit? I think that fire that we jumped on was the most interesting. To see, to really get to do it, you know. To see what you've learned, how to actually put it to practice.

RS: Fortunately, you did have one real fire.

WS: One real fire that I could say that I really had the experience of fighting a fire.

RS: Did you work on any other projects around camp here, while you were here? Did you do anything in the forest that—

WS: No, just...It pertained to, well, several ground fires that you hiked to. And then in our spare time, we would sometimes hike food and material up to lookout tower. It was a conditioning hike, is what it was. And it kept us in shape.

RS: Instead of the mules teams taking it up, you fellows took it up.

WS: We took it up by trail. And that usually would take at least a day.

RS: Did you enjoy the kind of getting in shape that was required?

WS: Oh, yes. Yeah, we went through some real calisthenics to get into shape and everything. And even through the rest of my life, now, I still exercise. There's certain things I do to keep in shape.

RS: It sharpens your mind, doesn't it?

WS: Yes, it does, and I just enjoy doing it, and so...It felt so good when you were in good shape, because we were just hard as nails. When we got through, while we were jumping and so on, it was...We were just in good physical condition.

RS: How about food? Did you like those...You weren't out on fires enough to eat the K-rations.

WS: Yeah, I had some K-rations.

RS: You had some K-rations.

WS: They were all right. They satisfied your appetite. But I would hate to live on them all the time, but they did the job.

RS: But generally speaking, you had good cooks and good food.

WS: Oh, yes. I couldn't complain about any of the personnel we worked with.

RS: And how did you feel about the mix of the kinds of fellows that were in the camp? You were one of the Mennos, so you were one of the majority, but—

WS: Well, in our group, see, there was eight in that group. Eight or 10. Anyway, we had some, I think, political objectors too. But there was no feeling whatsoever between any of them. I mean, any negative feelings. We got along real well. It seemed like the whole unit, when we trained, everybody was for the next guy. And I think it still prevails in...like in these get-togethers, there's nothing that—

RS: Isn't that amazing?

WS: What interests me more, I can have some other camp reunions, but they don't mean anything like this does here.

RS: Isn't that amazing? Forty years.

WS: 40 years, and you just...The fellows you met, it was kind of an unusual thing, to be in the smokejumpers, and it just, you just made friends and you seemed like everybody was for everybody.

RS: And everybody wants to come back in three years.

WS: Yes. Right.

RS: How do you feel about these young, vigorous, hard as nails young men getting to be retirement age?

WS: Well, I'm past retirement age but I hadn't even thought of retirement.

RS: Oh, I see.

WS: I've got to keep active, because I just couldn't sit around doing nothing. I like to travel, but, you know, a week or two of traveling—

RS: And that's it.

WS: That's it.

RS: Get back home and get back to work.

WS: I've got to have something to do.

RS: It keeps you young, doesn't it?

WS: Yes.

RS: You bet. Is there anything here we haven't covered, that you'd like to say?

WS: Well, I don't know, unless you would have some questions coming to your mind.

RS: I just thought maybe I missed something that was important to you, that you'd like to speak to.

WS: No, nothing that I can see on here.

RS: Or anything that isn't on here.

WS: I consider this project, smokejumping, is the highlight of my life. I mean, it was the most exciting thing I've ever done, and it was great. And I'm just sorry that I couldn't—

RS: Continue and do more of it.

WS: Yes, right.

RS: But you're glad for the part that you did have.

WS: I'm glad for the chance of having the opportunity.

RS: Ok, thank you very much for sharing this information with us.

WS: Well, I hope I can say...that it was really an experience. If I had to do it over again, I'd sure do it. Not for the injury, but I would like to have—

RS: If that kind of an opportunity came along, you would go for it again.

WS: I would go for it again. And any young person that would ask me about it, whether I would recommend it, I sure would.

RS: Oh, very good.

WS: If they want adventure, and especially for two, three, four years or whatever, as long as it's interesting to them.

RS: It's not just for yourself, but you'd recommend it for others.

WS: Yes.

RS: Ok, thank you very much.

WS: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]