

Oral History Number: 163-025

Interviewee: John L. Ainsworth

Interviewer: Rosa Stone

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Rosa Stone: Okay, this is an historical interview by Rosa Stone. And I'm interviewing...

John Ainsworth: John Ainsworth.

RS: So John, can you tell us something about your religious background and how that tied in with getting a 4-E classification? The conscientious objector status? What kind of problems or difficulties you had, if any?

JA: My family belonged to the Methodist church and I just felt that it wasn't the thing that people should do, to go to war to settle any differences and I decided that I shouldn't do that, and there was a classification which could be used, it was said, to do work of national importance. I applied for that. I was, at the time of draft time, working at Westinghouse. Some of that was military work. But I could have had a, how do you call—

RS: Exemption?

JA: Exemption to work at that plant, but I told them that I thought that I should go to this other service and they were a little bit... [unintelligible] was a little bit upset about it for a while, but no great difficulties. I got a little bit of argument within the family, I think they got mad and sent me off to—signed me to CPS in Massachusetts.

RS: Okay. So that was your first assignment, in Massachusetts.

JA: Petersham.

RS: And did you stay there quite a while?

JA: I was there all winter, I guess. I was there before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and at that time it was supposed to be one year. After that, things changed.

RS: You knew you were going to be there a while.

JA: I think the next summer I transferred to Coleville, in California. And that's where the smokejumpers started. Phil Stanley and Blackus (?) worked it out so a number of people came from that camp. I applied on the first one.

RS: Why did you want to go into smokejumpers?

JA: Well, I'd been going on quite a lot of fires in Massachusetts and Nevada and California. Like that girl on the geographic film, I'd just as soon parachute to a fire as walk. It was [unintelligible]. Some were physically capable and mentally adjusted to be able to do that.

RS: And you felt it was work of national importance.

JA: I thought firefighting was. In Massachusetts it was mostly cleaning up debris from the 1938 hurricane. Just sawing up logs, stacking them up, and then during the winter we'd burn them to keep warm. That's about all it was.

RS: But here you were protecting the ecology.

JA: And working with the Forest Service. Things they needed, out in outlying camps or telephone lines, fence building, helped build a cabin at the—patrol cabin up in the mountains near the [unintelligible] Park. Things like that.

RS: What year did you get into the smokejumpers?

JA: '43.

RS: You were one of the first ones who came. Were you here in '44 and '45?

JA: I stayed three years. Clear through to 1945.

RS: There weren't any other opportunities that came up that could compare with being in smokejumpers, is that right?

JA: Oh, I thought I would prefer to stay here. I could have—some of the other ones who did apply for other things they thought were important, but I was being selfish, I guess. Staying here in this nice country. And I liked jumping—

RS: You didn't feel it was risky.

JA: Oh yeah.

RS: So you were also risking, at the same time that you were being selfish.

JA: Well...

RS: Did you get your training here at Seeley Lake?

JA: Yes. Right across the lake here.

RS: And then you were assigned to what out-stations?

JA: Over the period, I was at Ninemile quite a bit. Was Monture Ranger station over here, east of Seeley Lake, and I was here at Seeley Lake one summer, at the ranger station. Out of Ninemile we were out in the work camp south of Ninemile, across the river. I was at Savenac planting trees, I was in the Missoula Forest Service building repairing telephones for a while. I was out at the winter range, where they take the horses in the wintertime, where the mules are kept.

RS: Did you like any of those projects better than others?

JA: Well I liked the telephone work better. Tree planting was a lot of hard work, but I thought that was useful work. I think the forest should do reforestation. That's what that was. Glad to do that.

RS: Even though it was hard. Did you get any injuries?

JA: No, I was very fortunate. I didn't get hurt on any jumps. Did the right things, I guess. Didn't hit any of those bad snags. I didn't have any opportunities, nobody was hurt on any jumps I was on, so I didn't have any rescue operations.

RS: So you were fortunate there again.

JA: Went pretty smooth.

RS: All three years. That's very interesting. And you didn't get hurt playing volleyball or on projects, or...okay. How many jumps did you make?

JA: I don't know exactly. 28 or 29. I didn't keep a log like some of them did, about everything.

RS: What was your first jump like?

JA: We trained out here and jumped in this little field out here. And it was no problem. We just say, well, when you're going to go off the step then you just have to do it and hope everything's going to be all right.

RS: You weren't frightened.

JA: Oh yeah. [unintelligible]

RS: Did you look down? Did you ride the step and look down?

JA: Yeah. You have a foot out there on the step, or at least if you're the first one. You got to be thinking about...You got to take your foot off of that step, and it's a big step—the next one's a big step.

RS: But I understand that period, then, after your chute opens is the most incredible period.

JA: Well, you fall for a short time. You're not sure if everything's going to be all right. And then depending on what kind of a parachute you had, you get a big thump or a whack. Sometimes it whacks you on the back of the head. But after that it's really—you're just floating up there. Look around and enjoy everything. It's quiet. Then you start thinking about where you're going to land and getting adjusted to landing in the right place.

RS: And you probably had some expertise in guiding your chute. You could steer it one way or the other to get to where you wanted to land.

JA: Yeah. You would have to make those steering adjustments, try to direct your—you slow down if there's any kind of wind, so that you use the wind to help you or slow you down to go back into it, so you don't overrun where you're going to land and don't come too short of it either.

RS: Anyone who was in smokejumpers that length of time with no injuries must have had more than just luck. You added your expertise to the luck.

JA: Well that's what the training is supposed to do.

RS: You can have misfortune even though you have good training, but you were one of the fortunate ones.

JA: You have to think what's happening and I didn't happen to land in some of those extremely difficult locations. Some of them did.

RS: Were some of the fires in extremely hard locations, far in, or up high, or far away from the road?

JA: Oh, there were some that really wasn't a difficult place to land. I was on one that was up in what is now the Bob Marshall, near Big Prairie, but I didn't have any problems.

RS: Getting into the—

JA: Landing.

RS: What was the longest fire you were on? How long did they last?

JA: Usually I had rather small fires. I was on that big one at Meadow Creek, but then we didn't stay there to finish up the fire. They brought in the paratroopers and took us away for other fires. That happened several times. One time I was up near the Montana-Idaho border, way north here, and they said we need you back in Missoula. Well, they took us in, away from that fire, and we went to bed. And then he says, just about the time that we were going to sleep, "We need you down in Missoula. Got the bus here. Come on out and we'll go."

RS: No jump, just the bus ride to the fire.

JA: We had jumped on a fire out there. And they took us off of the fire. So we rode all night— bus driver was from around Kalispell. So came through Kalispell early in the morning and he stopped at the bakery and we got some fresh bread. So it wasn't all bad. Then we came down to Missoula to get ready to go on another fire. I didn't keep a log, so I don't know the exact times of some of these things.

RS: But some of the memories are there, of keeping going and keeping going, just one fire after another sometimes.

JA: Yeah. I didn't happen to get to any that were so bad that you'd be tired out. Although it happened again here. I think we were on a fire just up the road here a ways, and we'd had a series of dry lightning storms. And a lot of local people were up there. They took us out of there back to Missoula in the night, rain and thunder, and next day we had to go out to Idaho where they'd had another dry storm. But they weren't that used up so that it was a problem.

RS: Did you always have adequate food and good food when you went out on your fires?

JA: Well, some of them were these little box K-rations. Not C-rations. Little cans of meat and cheese, bacon cheese, crackers. Some people didn't like them, but I'm not that fussy. I thought they were mostly all right. Couple of things weren't very good, but—

RS: They gave you the energy you needed to keep going.

JA: Yeah. Might have been a little short one time, but—it turned out to be in there. And they didn't send somebody else in there and they were supposed to drop more food. And some of the fellows got into that problem, where they didn't get around to bringing more. I was fortunate there, that never happened. Or I was.

RS: You never ran out. And they also sent the pack trains in to pick up your things. Your chutes and your supplies and things that were dropped in. How far did you ever have to walk out? What was the farthest you ever had to walk out for a fire?

JA: Somebody was talking about it here yesterday, and I don't know myself, one down in the Lolo Bitterroot border, I think, Idaho-Montana, they said it was 16 miles walking out. I think that's probably the longest.

RS: You didn't have to pack a lot of gear along when you went out though.

JA: We just stacked up the tools and suits and parachutes in a handy place where the packer could find it. Sometimes the packer came before we got through the fire, and sometimes we just left it where he could get it. But we didn't have to carry it out.

RS: The packer never took you out, he only took the goods out.

JA: Yes. We always walked.

RS: You never had the injured men to send out with the packer either.

JA: No. Nobody that was injured so they had to be carried. Might have been somebody that bunged up something.

RS: What did you say was your most interesting experience, while you were in smokejumpers?

JA: Well, I don't know. Concerning fires, or anything?

RS: Anything.

JA: The jumping itself was something that occupies your mind thoroughly. Completely. When you're doing it, you don't think too much about anything else during that. We had a lot of other interesting experiences. Being in at Big Prairie for one thing. It's a kind of attraction that a lot of the jumpers wanted to experience. I happened to be in there on a fire. I didn't stay very long. A lot of people had rough flights too, and I never had that problem. But one time it was very hot in Missoula, and we had the big Tri-motor, and heading north, and there were a lot of thermals, which lifted the plane. And normally the plane stayed down rather low, but we had quite a ways to go and the pilot just didn't...tried to keep the plane low and it went up and up and up, way up. A real smooth ride, and we got up, I suppose, 10,000 feet or so and it got kind of cold. We had the door open. It was a nice smooth ride.

RS: Even though you were going up and up.

JA: Well, the higher you go, the more air is going to get colder. And it was a very hot day and we went by the layer of hot air. Just suddenly turned quite cold.

RS: Now I understand when you get the sudden drops in between the mountains, that the boys had bags to vomit into.

JA: Yeah. I never experienced that. That was down low.

RS: You never got sick—

JA: This was a day of rising air currents. We didn't hit any holes. That's why it was really a delightful ride.

RS: Can you tell us something about the Big Prairie experiences? That happened to be in your experience?

JA: Well, we didn't see any bears or anything like that. It's just an exotic place to be at. Far away from the roads. Twenty-five miles is the shortest distance to the road. Isolated place like that. I've been interested in that sort of thing. Got educated into being outdoors years before when I went to YMCA camp five summers, most of the summer, in Michigan. It's different than Montana, but I like being out in places like that.

RS: You never considered being on a lookout tower.

JA: Oh, yeah. Thought about it.

RS: You might have liked it.

JA: Yeah, I think I would. I liked being up on high places. Elevation doesn't bother me.

RS: Not even in the plane.

JA: No. Once you get up in the air, that's pretty high up.

RS: What were you intending to do with your life, vocationally, when you were interrupted by the whole draft, the CPS, the smokejumper routine.

JA: Can I back up?

RS: Yes.

JA: When we went on this fire over to Idaho that was very interesting experience. It was at a lookout, on a mountaintop about 7,000 feet. And it was just a point. Pot Mountain, they called it. The fire was on a slope all around there. There was quite a few jumpers. And that night, another lightning storm came by. And we were out on the lookout and we could see the lightning striking all around. See a fire start in a tree, like that, when lightning strike it. And in addition, after a lightning strike, everything was quiet. And then the lookout has ground cables to the lightning rods, and you'd hear them start building up humming, buzzing, and get louder

and louder, and then the lightning strike would go off over there. And it would be quiet again. Do that time after time. That was interesting.

RS: That was spectacular, wasn't it? To be able to see that, to have—

JA: A real view of a lightning storm all around. The lightning rods, I guess, protected us. Didn't get it close. But it had hit, to start that fire pretty far away.

RS: Then did you have other fires to put out, from that storm?

JA: No, we didn't do that. I guess it rained that night, after that.

RS: The rain took care of it.

JA: Another thing that happened there is we were up very high and we looked down a canyon—it was late in the fall—and I see a flock of snow geese flying through the canyon. Interesting things like that. I remember that, a lot of things that don't—

RS: Yes, but there are some things that really stand out, even after 40 years.

JA: Yeah. I remembered that lightning storm and the geese.

JA: I was an electrical engineer. I was interested in electric railroads. Thought at one time I might have worked for the Milwaukee Road, but I didn't quite arrive at that. I put in some applications and talked to them, but eventually did other things. I'm still interested in that sort of thing.

RS: Okay. What did you do then, after? How did you get your release, did you go somewhere else?

JA: I was released from Savenac because the time was up. Four years. Then I went home. Worked with the Friends, the Quaker clothing bailing place for a little while, part time.

RS: Was that a volunteer thing?

JA: Yeah. Just getting readjusted. And I went to work in...Well, I could have gone back to Westinghouse and picked up where I'd left off, and I almost did that, but I strung it out too long and they finally said well, don't bother coming back. We don't think you really wanted to anyway. So I went to work at a motor shop for a while, learn about electric motors, and I would have gone back to Westinghouse. I left that job and I found out they said not to come, so I went to work for Bechtel on the frequency change thing in Southern California. Change from 50 to 60 cycles. And I worked on that for couple of years, I guess. Then they were through, they were releasing people. Which they wouldn't do today. Had a shortage of engineering jobs at that

time. And I worked on a couple other jobs, and thought I didn't want to live down there, too many people anymore. Head back up north. I worked for the state of California bridge department, drawbridges, for a short time, and applied for engineering jobs with the Department of Interior, the federal Department of Interior. Finally, one comes through back in Montana, so we came back to Montana. Stayed here about 14 years.

RS: Is that where you live now?

JA: No. I left here 22 years ago, went to Washington [unintelligible]. I came and worked for the Bureau of Reclamation and they wanted me to go to Washington, which we did.

RS: And you were there ever since?

JA: I worked there 'til I retired. Electric power engineer.

RS: But you got back to the west.

JA: Well, I was in California.

RS: And then 14 years in Montana.

JA: Stayed out west. I was born in Washington.

RS: Oh, I see.

JA: Spokane. We lived in Michigan and then California.

RS: But you were sent to Massachusetts.

JA: I was in Pennsylvania when I went to Massachusetts. Working at Westinghouse.

RS: If you hadn't been interrupted with the draft coming along, would you have stayed at Westinghouse, do you suppose?

JA: Probably. Part of the work I was doing was testing controls for streetcars. They were still making streetcars. And I probably would have continued in that, or would have tried to anyway, had they continued making streetcars and electric locomotives.

RS: See, you should have gone into computers, only there weren't any computers then.

JA: There weren't any.

RS: Right. [laughs] And you haven't gotten into the computer line at all.

JA: I have one. My own. Smaller. I know a little bit about it.

RS: If you had it to do over again, would you have gone the same route of joining the smokejumpers?

JA: Oh, I think so. It was an interesting experience. I still think it was useful. And selfishly interesting to me. Kind of a thrill to do the jumps. The jump doesn't last very long.

RS: Is there anything besides this material that you'd like to speak to? Is there anything that's important to you that you'd like to say?

JA: Well, why I did this, maybe?

RS: Yes. Why you did this? How you got along with the particular bunch of fellows that you rubbed elbows with in those years.

JA: Well, we had a lot of good friends, that's why we come back here.

RS: Right. It's what draws you back all the time.

JA: Interesting people, and have similar goals, as to what people should be trying to do, and not what our government seems to be doing, especially today. It's pretty disgusting. I can't believe what they say. I thought the Forest Service was—they didn't have the terms at that time, ecological organization that took care of things that we needed to have taken care of. Today, we've been disillusioned about where we're headed. They're chopping down everything.

RS: But back then it was better? Their programs were better then?

JA: Well, didn't really know, but. Thought it was that type of forest caring organization, and other things. [unintelligible]

RS: Would you ever have had an interlude of being with nature and being in nature like what you did being in smokejumpers, with your interest in the electrical field?

JA: Oh, I've always had side interests in nature things. For a long time. I guess some people might have really eliminated that part for concentrating on electrical apparatuses. I'm interested in what they call alternative energy of all kinds. Wind, solar, energy efficient houses. I'd like to have an underground house. I don't know if I ever will. Considering it. Oh, quite a few years ago, I thought being an electrical engineer, and the way fuel was being used up, that I should have an electric car. So I made one.

RS: You made one?

JA: They had kits from army surplus motors, aircraft motors, and they were designed to fit in a Volkswagen. So I put one together, but it was pretty slow. Ran it about, something over 4,000 miles. I didn't keep track of it, just around town. And took it apart and was going to make a better one. And that didn't work out. Didn't get all the pieces. I've found that you can get better ones than the one I was going to make. So I threw away a lot of money and time on that. I'm still interested in that sort of thing, and if I...if this [the reunion] hadn't come at this time I would have been at the Expo. This week is electric vehicle week.

RS: Oh, and you gave up the World's Fair electrical vehicle week to come to the reunion. It's pretty strong attraction, to come to this, isn't it? Yes.

JA: Well, discussing what we should be doing. That's more important. This is a sideline.

RS: And even though you're retired now, you're still interested in the electrical, and still interested in what we can do personally and group-wise for peace?

JA: Yeah, very much.

RS: Your work is still work of national importance.

JA: Yeah. Counteracting what the government's doing. [laughs].

RS: Getting that personal slant in and keeping it...the government needs people like you to keep it honest.

JA: I never used to write letters or really write to our senators and congressmen, and other people. Been introduced to some resources that I didn't know about before, to CPS people. We just have to keep working on it.

RS: And you'll be back in three years, is that right?

JA: Well, I suppose.

RS: Good.

JA: If that comes about.

RS: Very good. Okay. I appreciate you spending this time and sharing.

JA: Well. What are you going to do with it? You said the research.

RS: Yes. They're gathering material from all the smokejumpers that they can get, and doing this in the form of oral histories as much as they can. And they're going to have some research projects done on this then. And when you get the pictures, [it's] like getting the picture from many, many sides. It's not just a four-sided picture.

JA: Some kind of a composite background?

RS: I think so.

JA: Why are—

RS: Yes. And they're finding the strands and the elements that were in the experience, for the people who did smokejumping. It's much larger than the CPS group. It's for all the smokejumpers.

JA: Oh. They've already done that—

RS: They've done a lot of them. And they had these packets for people that they couldn't reach to do the oral ones, and they wanted them to fill those in. This is more personable [personal] than just the papers that you fill out. So it's very useful. It's your view on the experience, and it's very helpful to have for the total project. And many people will be using this material. Looking at it and using it. They'll make transcripts, which will be available. And you've done your share here, for the research.

JA: Well, hope it's useful.

RS: Good. And thank you very much.

JA: [unintelligible] we continued our—

[End of Interview]