

This is an interview with Richard Clearman at the University of Montana Archives on June 27, 1984, the interviewer is Renee Gouaux. OH# 133-16.

RG OK, I'd like first start out asking Richard, what attracted you to smokejumping?

RC Well, the fact of the matter is, there was four of us going to school there, here, [U of Montana], and uh, we lived off campus and we ate at the Chimney Corners and we had our girl friends at Chimney Corners and it was the, the in-thing, to be a smokejumpers. We all knew that in order to qualify for smokejumping you had to be a, had to have one year's previous experience with the Forest Service. None of us did, so we knew we weren't qualified. But we were all from Montana and so we went down to interview Fred Brauer, the manager at that time. He interviewed us and decided that since we were all Montana boys and we'd all had some prior experience, he hired us all. And that's how we wound in the smokejumping,[laughs].

RG Sounds unusual.

RC That's not a very good reason but that's how come we got there.

RG Uh huh. How old were you when you were, started smokejumping?

RC Nineteen.

RG How many years did you jump?

RC Three. '52, '53 and '54.

RG Were you going to school during that time?

RC Yeah, I was going to the University, [of Montana].

RG What kind of training did you have before you made your first jump?

RC We had, we went out to the station, was at that time at Nine Mile. And we had a total four weeks training, about three weeks before we did our first jump. They went through all the different procedures and roles and that kind of thing. I'd never been in an airplane before, till we took off in the old Tri-motor Ford. I was up, jumped 12 or 13 times before I ever landed in an airplane.

RG Hmm. Hmm.

RC But we had our training out at the Nine Mile station.

RG Do you remember your first jump?

RC Very definitely.

RG What was it like?

RC What am I doing here? [laughter] No, actually we'd been trained to uh, to the point where it was a reflex, you know. Everything, out the practice door so many times, when it come time to do it, it was just a reflex.

RG What kind of fire did you jump on for the first time? Was it a really large fire?

RC No, I was only on one large fire and that was in '53. I practically don't remember the first fire because I got air sick. Only time I ever got air sick.

RG Uh huh. Do you remember the equipment that you carried?

RC Well, we didn't carry any equipment when we jumped. They dropped that separately and we used pulaskis and cross-cut saws for the fire and then what they call a lady shovel, you know, a short handled shovel. That's what we fought fire with.

RG Did it ever vary or was it a pretty standard set of tools?

RC Oh, it was a standard set of tools. All your fire packs were packed identical. You'd normally go like two man fire, four man fire and then they drop in a cargo pack with you c-rations and your tools. A separate drop. That's where we learned to dislike C-rations.

RG Uh huh. What kind of living arrangements did you have when you first started smokejumping?

RC Well, when we took our training, we uh, it was an old CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp out at Nine Mile. They were old wooden barracks and then uh, for the fire season... I don't remember where we stayed. We were flying out of... I don't remember where we stayed. But we were flying out of the old Hale Field here in town, [Missoula]. I don't know where I stayed.

RG Could you have stayed out at the aerial fire depot?

RC Well this was before the aerial fire depot was opened.

RG Uh huh.

RC We stayed there the second season, but the first season we were jumping out of the Hale Field out here and I don't recall where we stayed.

RG How many jumps did you make your first year, do you remember?

RC Oh... well, we had seven practice jumps. I think six fire jumps. I'm not sure, maybe six.

RG It was a pretty wet summer?

RC Yeah, it was kind of slow, the summer of '52. That was the summer of '52 and was, oh I'd say an average [year]. '53 was a very big fire season, '54 was practically nothing, only got one fire in '54.

RG When you weren't jumping what other kind of work did you do?

RC Well, we worked around the loft, you know, packing cargo chutes and getting gear ready and that kind of stuff. Part of that summer of '52 they sent us on a crew to uh, clear an airport approach on a... lake in... the Salmon River Wilderness Area and I don't know the name of the lake. We spent three weeks up there falling trees, chasing moose, killing gophers with a pulaski. Ever kill gophers with a pulaski?

RG No, I haven't, I've never heard of it.

RC It takes a lot of patience, [laughs].

RG That's great. Did you enjoy this project work?

RC Oh yeah. It was, you know, there wasn't any fires so that's what we were doing. We were falling trees with old cross-cut saws. We were clearing an approach to the runway. That's the only time I was on the project, I think I was there about three weeks.

RG How many people would go out on a project like the one you went to the Salmon River?

RC There was five on the project that I went on. One guy cooked and four guys worked. The ranger never, the ranger was supposed to come in and check us but he never did. He came and told us what to do when we got there and that was it, we never saw him.

RG What did your cohorts think about project work? Did they also enjoy it?

RC I don't whether we really discussed it. We went cause we had to, [laughs]. I don't know really. We much rather had been on a fire because you make over time, you could make a lot more money.

RG Right. Right. Did you have any time off during the smokejumping season?

RC No. Well, Saturday and Sunday unless we were on a fire. But we were all making money to go to school so we worked all we could.

RG During the time off that you had on the weekends, did you often spend that time with other smokejumpers?

RC Not that... we got engaged that summer. I was talking to my wife, future wife the first year and the second year we were married.

RG So you didn't spend a lot of time fraternizing?

RC No, not much.

RG During the three years that you were a smokejumper, were you ever stationed at different bases?

RC No, I was always out of Missoula. A lot of the other fellows did, went to Alaska and Yellowstone and then down into Idaho and New Mexico. But I was always in Missoula.

RG How far away was the most distant fire that you jumped?

RC Well, we'd been down in Idaho, I don't know, probably two hours flying time. I'm not sure. We went the furthest, had been down into the Idaho Wilderness area, Salmon River country.

RG So you made most of your jumps in Montana and Idaho?

RC Yeah, all of them. All of them in Montana and Idaho. Actually most of them in Idaho because that's where most of the fires were in '53 and that's where we went.

RG Can you tell me about one of the biggest fires, you said that you jumped on, that was during 1953.

RC Yeah, the biggest fire, it was actually right on the Salmon River itself. It turned out to be about a 5000 acre fire, was started by a fisherman and he let it get away and it was in grass, most of it. And it literally exploded and went up from the bottom of the Salmon River clear to the ridge along side the river. We jumped late in the afternoon, the fire had already gotten to the top of the ridge. We went along the top of the ridge and picked up the coals and stuff and threw them back into the area where the fire had been burned and the next morning the fire was out. But that was the biggest one I was on, 5000 acres. The worst fire I was on as far as hot and hard work was inside of Missoula, was between here and, on the ridge line up by where the TV tower is. It was a crown fire and that was in heavy timber and it was hot, hard work.

RG When was that fire?

RC '53.

RG In '53?

RC Yeah.

RG Do you remember how it got started?

RC I think it was lightning, I'm almost sure it was.

RG How long did it take to put it out?

RC Oh, probably, I'm not sure, probably around three days before we caught up with it. They'd brought in some Indian crews and we jumped in the afternoon to control it. We worked all that day and all the next day, all that night and the next day getting a line around it. Mostly we followed it up the hill, we couldn't get, we couldn't stop it, it was too hot. Just crowned and when a fire crowns, get out of the way.

RG That's right.

RC The only crown fire there ever was, actual crown fire.

RG So you worked continuously around the clock?

RC On a fire like that you do, yes.

RG Were you replaced then by other people?

RC Well, they brought in some crews. There was an indian crew and some other crews that came in and that relieved you and then you rest and eat and go back.

RG How long is the longest amount of time that smokejumpers can work without taking a break, is there any cut off point?

RC Till you get tired, [laughs].

RG There isn't any regulation?

RC I probably, the longest, no, well there wasn't then. Just worked uh, probably the longest I worked was right close to 48 hours straight... without a break.

RG Were the fire management policies any different in the time that, during the span of time that you jumped, that you can remember?

RC Well the management policy was put them out, you know, totally. There was no, this idea now of letting some of them burn because it's a good idea to allow re-forestation. There was no concept of that, just put them out. Even in the Yellowstone, we had crews there, and it was put everything out as quick as you can.

RG Right. Is there any experience that you remember as a smokejumper that was particularly exciting for you?

RC There was some hair raising ones. There was a couple fires, couple jumps that I got, you don't have time to be scared at the time, but you think back on it and get scared. On that fire that we jumped up here I was telling you was so hot, we were jumping from a C-47 and we jumped three man sticks. The stick I jumped with had two new guys and they didn't know how to control their chutes. And so instead of getting into the drop zone, in order to avoid running into them, I wandered, or wandered and wound up in

the trees. I hung up in the trees and then branches broke and I fell. And of course you don't know how high you are. I was about 40 feet off the ground, cut my lip. Scared me, [laughs].

RG Wow!

RC But that, you know, you don't have time to, you just react. The same summer I jumped on a fire down in Idaho. It was up in an alpine area and uh, there was a fire, lightning fire way up high and we couldn't find any place to land, to jump that wasn't rocky. There were too many rock slides. And we finally found the place that, when we flew over that looked like it was brush and grass. And so when we jumped, we got down 150 feet or so off the ground and I could see that the grass was moss on rocks. There was no ground, just rocks. And so I turned and went down hill and hung up in a big spruce.

We had to use our, I used my let down rope. I was hung on top of the tree and that would hang you down about 40 feet and the let down rope was about 100 feet long. And when I got down, I had about ten feet of rope left when I got down to the ground. And on the ground, there was just a mess of trees and stuff, if a guy hadn't hung up, he'd have got massacred. But there was four of us jumped on the fire and we all got down without a scratch, guess it was all right.

RG Yeah. What did the other jumpers do for a landing?

RC Well, one of them landed in trees like I did. The other two lit in the rocks... and walked away... and put the fire out, [laughs].

RG In a case like that, is there any way for you to communicate to the other jumpers with hand signals while you're in the air?

RC Not, in the time frame allowed. Between the time we jumped and the second, we jumped two man sticks. There isn't that time frame. Once you get on the ground, we had panels that we could communicate, lay out different signals to the plane. But that wasn't normally done between sticks when you jump. It was done after you were on the ground and the plane would come over to check, see what you were and if anybody was hurt or anything. You would put out a panel to tell them.

RG You'd put out the panels with... ?

RC Different...

RG Were they streamers, crepe paper?

RC They were, yeah they were crepe paper streamer that you could put in different... you know, a T and that kind of stuff. Different signals to the plane to tell them what your situation was. And you always put one out to say I'm OK and if you didn't put that out then they'd get concerned. But if you had something different to say then you'd rearrange the panel to tell. That

way, we didn't have radios but just on the big fires, there were no small radios.

RG Was there any activity that you were particularly fond of that was part of smokejumping?

RC I don't know. There was a great bunch of guys to work with. I remember that because of the situation, you know. They worked hard. But uh, it was a lot of fun to work with them, cause we could build more fire lines than any other crew, bar none.

RG Oh really? You were working with a pretty outstanding group of people?

RC Oh yeah. That was one of the, you know, you took care of each other and always a good group to work with. Working like that got a lot of work done.

RG I can imagine. Did you have an opportunity to meet people then from other parts of the country?

RC Oh yeah, yeah. Well, there was, you know, there was... well the guys that were jumping you know, they came from all over. They weren't just Montanans. Mostly forestry students, but there was a lot of people that weren't forestry students, too.

RG So there were quite a few students that were jumping when you were jumping?

RC I'd say the majority at that time were students. And they'd jump for two or three years and... go on about your career and somebody else, they'd hire other students. They didn't have, there wasn't the career employee. Only a very few positions, I doubt if there was a half a dozen year round employees in the jumpers at that time.

RG What was the age of most of the people, early twenties?

RC Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, something like that. There were, we had a few people from... the airborne World War II. But that was, there were some of those, like Hal Samsel. Have you interviewed him?

RG No I haven't, what kind of work did he do?

RC He was a jumper and he was one of the section chiefs. You should interview him, he was a nut, [laughs].

RG In what way? Tell me more about...

RC Well the thing I remember about Hal is uh, I guess the thing that sticks in my mind, he wouldn't buy new boots. And he had these old G.I. boots and they started to wear, fall apart, and he took wire and he wrapped them to keep the soles on. One of the nutty things he did. But he was a good man, you know, a good

man to work with. He always kept you entertained.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC He's here in town, I think he worked for the Forest Service for a long time. I think he's only been a year or two retired.

RG I'll have to inquire about him.

RC He jumped for a long time. He was kind of a, one of the early career jumpers. At that time a guy could work about six months a year by going down to New Mexico in March and April and then uh, work the regular season here. And he did that. He was one of the characters.

RG You mentioned that he didn't want to replace his boots, what kind of boots did you wear?

RC White's.[Boots from White's Shoe Shop, Inc., Spokane, WA.] They took us all down to the Dragsteads here [Missoula] and we bought White's. They lined us up and we bought White's.

RG Were they pretty sturdy boots?

RC Oh yeah. I still have one pair of them. The sole finally came off a couple years ago, I still have one pair. Cost \$25.00, I can remember that. \$25.00 at that time was a big price.

RG I'm sure it must have been. Did they usually last for more than one season?

RC Oh yeah. I got in the fire and didn't realize it and I burned the sole off one of them so I had to replace it. But normally it'd last for a couple seasons.

RG During your career, I guess, as a smokejumper, did you ever work as a spotter or a pilot?

RC No. I... I just didn't. They were talking about in the third year but I, we didn't have any fires the third year so... Then I was graduating from college, knew I was going to leave so they didn't train me to be a spotter.

RG Do you think that your experience as a smokejumper has influenced the rest of your life?

RC Oh, I suppose in a way it was. It's something a guy looks back on. It was a lot of fun. Some ways kind of a dumb thing to do but, when you're 19 you kind of get the feeling you're indestructable.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC It was a lot of fun. I wouldn't do it again and I wouldn't push my kids to do it. But, my parents never said anything. I was

amazed. If I was them I think I'd have... [laughs] not been very happy.

RG Would have laid the law down? You must have found it, or I should say, did you find it exciting for three years that you jumped?

RC Oh yes, it was fun, really a lot of fun and interesting and good crew of people. Got to see a lot of country. One of my, one thing I remember that was a little different was we had, course Johnson Air Service flew us. And the pilots were extremely well versed in the back country and knew where everything was. We went down to, we were going down to Idaho to a fire early in the morning in the old Tri-motor Ford. We were heading south and the pilot chopped the engines and we started gliding. He turned around to us and pointed out the window and we could see a lookout. We glided up to the lookout and just as we got to the lookout, the pilot poured the coal to the engines again. The lookout obviously had been asleep, it was about 5:00 in the morning and I can still see him in his bed and his sheets everything coming unglued through the windows as we went by about 100 feet away, [laughs].

RG That's amazing.

RC The pilot laughed and so did we, [laughs].

RG How common is that for a pilot to turn off the engine during his flying?

RC Well, he put them back to just an idle.

RG Oh, OK.

RC Just an idle, chopped is pull them back to just an idle.

RG Right.

RC Would make virtually no noise.

RG Right. Did you jump out of the Ford Tri-motor plane most of the time?

RC Probably about half of the jumps. We used a C-47, we used a Travelaire. That was that was a single engine aircraft. An old cloth... had a cloth covered fuselage, and we had a Twin Beech Bonanza, then we had a Noorduyn, that was a single engine aircraft. Terrible plane, terrible. You could hardly... didn't have enough lift, took you forever to get up to, get up.

RG What was the average response time to a fire?

RC Well, if it came during the day and you were there, we probably would be airborne, ten, fifteen minutes.

RG Hmm.

RC But in the fire season of '53 when it got bad, we'd come back from a fire and go home and get cleaned up and be at the airport 5:00 in the morning or dark. We'd just suit up and take off to wherever the fires were. There was fires every day. We never stayed in town at all through the whole season. From oh, about like the 4th of July to well into September we were, we weren't in town. They kept some of the people that were sick or injured to pack chutes and stuff. Everybody that was able bodied was gone virtually the whole season.

RG Did you ever incur any injuries?

RC Nothing serious. Scratched my eye, twisted my knee, things like that.

RG No permanent damage?

RC No.

RG Do you remember ever being on a fire or on a jump when someone was injured?

RC I remember some guys getting hurt in practice jumps. But I... I don't think we ever had a serious injury on a fire that I was on, or from the fire itself. I think we had, you know, you always get some cuts and scratches and bruises and things. But nothing serious.

RG You weren't in any near critical or near fatal incidents?

RC Not that I'm aware of.

RG Uh huh.

RC I had a chute invert on me one time. It just meant that it didn't control right, came down at the same speed. When a chute inverts, normally your risers go straight up. When the chute inverts, they cross behind you head and then you can't control it, like normally you could control your chute and turn to the right or left and change your speed and that kind of thing. When it inverts like that, well it, you don't have any control.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC So, but that chute I hung up in a snag and when I got out of the snag, it was thoroughly destroyed so nobody ever jumped in it again.

RG Did you use the same kinds of parachutes during the three years that you jumped?

RC Yes. They were, I think they were... I think they were modified, what they call a T-10 with slots and tails.

RG Derry Slots?

RC Yeah, there was two, one on each side. Then they have the tails to get the forward speed and if you close the slots, that would turn you right or left.

RG Did you find it difficult to learn how to maneuver a parachute?

RC Not after the training they gave us. It did exactly what they said it would do.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC They were very maneuverable. We just, they've got a lot more maneuverable chutes now. But they were, you could turn right and left, either way. You'd have about six miles an hour forward speed.

RG Did you, do you ever remember somebody having to use their spare parachute?

RC No. Well, now that's not true. I think in one of our practice jumps... why, there was one opened on a practice jump, I don't know. I think it happened while I was on the way down. I don't know whether it was... because the main chute, I think the main chute had inverted or he had a line over it. That's what, he had a line over it. He was coming down too fast and he popped his emergency chute to get in more... you know, you wind up with a, you got a complete line over it. Instead of having a full chute you've only got two bubbles. Kind of looks like a brazier, that's what it was, and so he popped his emergency to get more lift or more...

RG Resistance?

RC Resistance.

RG Going to go back and ask you a few questions about your training. Was there a high attrition rate of people during the first training session, during your first training session?

RC Not really, I don't think so, very few. Because they were pretty carefully screened and most of them were personally interviewed by the boss. We never had anybody that didn't jump, there was never a question on that. There was a few people washed out because of physical, they couldn't do the PT [Physical Training] or that kind of thing. But only, I don't think, I think we probably had 65 or 70 take training and I doubt if there was over two or three that didn't finish.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC They didn't, you know they were pretty carefully screened at that time. You had to take a PT test and that kind of thing

before you could start. And most of the people had some experience in fires and stuff so there wasn't... high attrition.

RG You said that your family didn't didn't bias your decision to become a jumper. Do you remember other jumpers who came from families that either discouraged or encouraged them to jump?

RC I don't think the subject was ever discussed, I don't recall.

RG Uh huh.

RC I didn't, didn't ask my family. I did it and they never said anything. As a parent, I don't think I can do that, [laughs].

RG Mmm mmm. Right. Did any of your fellow jumpers carry good luck pieces or feel superstitious at all about certain jumps or certain days?

RC I don't, again I don't recall that.

RG Uh huh.

RC Could have been, it's something that I don't recall.

RG You didn't I take it?

RC No, I don't think so. I never have carried a good luck piece.

RG I'd like you to describe as best as you can remember the sequence of events after you had touched the ground.

RC Well, you mean when we landed or what we did to put the fire out?

RG After you would land from a jump and then the sequence of events up until the time that you put the fire out.

RC Well, of course it varied on the fire. But normally, obviously the first thing that you do is get yourself out of the tree or wherever. And then you'd pack up your chute and emergency chute and uh, mark them so you could find them again. Unless you happen to be right close to a Forest Service trail. Because you had to take them to a Forest Service trail after the fire was out. Because the system at that time was... local ranger had packers that would come in with these mules and pick up your jump gear and take it out. They weighed 110 pounds and so the first thing was to mark the location of your gear. You'd usually sack it, just took a minute. And then you'd get your fire fighting pack, which was dropped separately. And then that would be your C-rations and your water and your tools. And then you'd take that stuff to the fire.

And then you'd work at controlling the fire and of course every fire was different. There were, I jumped on one fire down in Idaho that took us less than 45 minutes to put it out. It was a lightning strike in two spots of grass, moss and stuff burning

about four feet across. That's all the fire there was. But there was fire and if we hadn't been there it would have spread, of course.

RG How many people jumped on that fire?

RC Always two... for safety reasons. And others, you know, sometimes you'd work right straight through for 24 hours or 36 hours. And we had a pulaski and lady shovel and a saw. We used the saw to cut trees out of the way, pulaski to cut brush and small stuff, and used the back of the pulaski to make a fire line. The idea was, we were trained to separate the fire from the material and that's how you put the fire out. The fire burned itself out because you separate it from the burning, from the material that could burn.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC I was on one fire where there was a little stream running through the fire and they dropped this, some canvas hose. We made a dam with the canvas and we put the fire out with the water. And we would fill the little lake up, we would run water for about ten minutes and then we'd have to shut it off and it'd fill up again. We didn't have to build a fire line on that one, we put it out with water, [laughs].

RG All right, that's great. Did you ever use a portable water pump to help put out fires?

RC I was never that, we were never that close to water. That one time with the little creek running through it was the only time we were close enough to use water.

RG Huh. After you landed, what kind of signals would you give to the pilot and the spotter?

RC Well, we had those panels I was talking about before.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC I don't remember what they were but you always signaled that you were down and OK. And after they'd dropped your gear they'd make a pass over you and if they saw your OK signal, they were gone.

RG So if there was any reason for you to get in touch with someone back at the base after you had been dropped off and after the plane had seen your initial signal after landing, how could you do that?

RC You didn't. They, the local district, I think, were responsible to check us every couple days. And they would fly over and if we had our OK panels out, that's all there was to it.

RG Just every couple days? Were you trained in first-aid?

RC Yes, trained in first-aid, trained how to read a map. You better know how to read a map cause when you went out the door you had a map and they said this is where the fire is and there's the nearest ranger facility and we'll see you. If you can't read the map, you're in trouble, [laughs].

RG Have you used any of those map reading skills since then?

RC Oh yeah, I spent 20 years in the Army and I was in the field artillery and we used the same map, same system. So it was a real asset to me from that point of view and I, I knew how to read a map.

RG Are there any other skills that you learned as a smokejumper that you've used?

RC Oh, probably a little bit on how to fall trees, but not too much else. I never fought any fires since then.

RG You said that your only experience doing project work was the one three week experience that you had working in Idaho. Did that offer any kind of skills that you, for you?

RC No, we just, we were falling trees.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC With a cross-cut saw.

RG You weren't engaged in building fences or maintaining buildings?

RC No, we never did. I never did, I'm sure it was done but I, the project I was on, we didn't do that.

RG Mmm mmm.

RC Could I take a break?
[tape is turned off and then on again]

RG How much money did you make as a smokejumper?

RC We got paid \$1.65 an hour straight time, no time and a half, no double time. We just got paid for how many hours we worked. The only advantage was that you were considered working when you were on a fire, essentially all the time you were away. Which was pretty close to true because you were either, you know, fixing a meal for yourself or your buddies or you were working on the fire. There wasn't any in between so a lot of days you'd, if you're on a fire you'd probably average 20 hours a day or more time.

RG And how much would you get for overtime?

RC Well, we got \$1.65 an hour. There was no overtime.

RG Oh, overtime was just...

RC There was no time and a half.

RG OK, all right.

RC We were, I think we were grade GS-5 or something like that. There was no hazard pay, there was no time and a half.

RG And that included the room and the board that you would get then?

RC We had to pay for the meals out of that unless we were on a fire and then we got to eat C-rations free.

RG But if you ate...

RC If you ate the second and third year when they had the jump center open, you could eat in the cafeteria but you had to pay for your meals. So if you, you stayed in camp, you didn't make much money because the meals were fairly expensive.

RG You were telling me earlier about the Forest Service picking up your parachute gear after you would land.

RC Yeah. Well the policy was at that time, that, well when you start a fire season, you put together two sets of jump suits. A helmet, coat, vest and then a harness. And the harness, of course, was fitted to you and sewed in the right, the right length so that you didn't have, you didn't do any adjustments on it. And on a normal fire season when you went out, you would... go on a fire, you, after you had the fire out you'd get your, all your chutes and harness and all the fire fighting equipment and take it to the nearest Forest Service trail. And then we'd flag it and then when you went in you always went by a ranger station and you'd tell the ranger where you left it.

He'd send a packer out to get it. Because each guy's pack and gear was yours and tools and so on, weighed 110 pounds. And the idea was that if you had two sets, by the time the first one got back, if you went on another fire, it'd be back before you got back from the second fire. In the summer of '53, however, where there was so many fires, they literally ran out of gear.

And the furthest hike out I ever had was the one that they said if you want to go on another fire, bring your gear out. And that was down in the Moose Creek area in Idaho and we had a 40, 41 mile hike out. We packed out 110 pounds on what was called a clack frame. Was, I don't know if you've ever seen one, but it's a square, wooden frame that is nothing like what we have today as a pack frame. And it... I had saddle sores on my shoulder blades and my hip bones for days.

RG Oh, I can imagine.

RC It was, took us a day and a half to walk out.

RG It took you a day and a half to walk 41 miles? That's pretty good time.

RC With gear on our backs. We ran into a bear and we let him have the trail and we ran into a bull moose and we let him have the trail also.

RG Wow.

RC We made detours.

RG Huh. How many people were with you?

RC Just two of us on that one. That was that one I was telling you about that was just a little bitty spot.

RG Right.

RC I don't think it was over four feet square.

RG So it took you 45 minutes to put out the fire and a day a half to get back?

RC Right and you had to stay, the regulations at that time, you had to stay one day past the time the last smoke was seen. So we couldn't leave the fire the day that we put it out. We couldn't leave till the next morning. So you always had to stay 24 hours from the last smoke.

RG Did you ever have any interesting encounters with wildlife?

RC Well other than that time running into the moose and the bear... late in that summer of '53, we went on a fire. It was called the Siamese Lakes, just on the Idaho-Montana border. And I had a fellow with me from California, he'd never been in the woods before and we were coming out from the fire, we ran into a bull elk. Well, being from Montana, I was enjoying the scenery and watching him. This guy from California said he was going to charge, he was gonna charge, and he threw down his gear and took off down the mountain on a dead run, scared the elk.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

RC But uh, no, I don't, we never had any, other than, you know, you'd see wildlife.

RG Uh huh.

RC I remember, you were talking about stories, one time that summer of '53 again, we were down in Idaho and we were coming out from a fire. And it had been hot, really hot in the fire and of

course when you're on a fire you have no water to wash with. You have water to drink and so you get dirty. And we were coming, come down on to the Salmon River itself, and the trail was going along side the Salmon River and there was six or eight of us. We come around this corner and there was this pool, just beautiful. Sandy beaches, clear, deep and everybody was extremely hot and sticky and dirty and without any questions everybody chucked and dived in. The only problem was that the Salmon River is cold, I mean cold, and I literally bounced and come back out of the river, [laughs], it was too cold. We washed up, but we didn't swim, it was too cold.

RG No one else could withstand the cold water?

RC I think one guy swam across the river and then he got out and warmed up and swam back, but that was it.

RG Did you ever take any other kind of hikes or entries into the wilderness when you were smokejumping? Do you happen to be able to remember doing that?

RC I don't think so. You know, it was just a job and you worked at it all summer and you were either working or... in my case I was home.

RG Do you remember ever seeing any other people out in the woods while you, when you were fighting fires?

RC Yeah, again that summer of '53 they had, in Idaho they have an early elk season and we jumped on a fire that hunters had obviously started and... like there was a dead elk by the fire, somebody had shot and left. There was a packer in there with some other hunters, we exchanged courtesies with the hunters and the packers and they went hunting and we went fire fighting.

RG Those were the only people that you remember seeing?

RC Other than crews that were brought in on some of the bigger fires. I don't think we ever saw anybody else. I, oh, I take that back. Now one time, this is kind of a funny little thing if you talk about seeing people. We were up by Condon on a fire and we had been out for a couple days and.... hadn't seen anybody, nothing. And we were getting pretty close to being out, coming down the Forest Service trail and it turned into a, an old logging road that hadn't had no traffic on it whatsoever. And we were going down the road and I look over to the right and there was a little red headed kid looking at me. I mean two or three years old and I looked around and there was another little red headed kid and another little red headed kid. There was a family that had a cabin back in there and there was six, seven of these little red headed kids, one every year, and you know, we were walking out of the woods, first thing we saw was all these red headed kids looking at us from the bushes.

RG Did you ever come in contact with people who'd been on lookout towers?

RC Only once and that was on that long hike. We stayed overnight at a lookout, on our way out. We made 25 miles the first day, 15 miles the second day.

RG There were a lot more lookouts that were manned I understand in those days than today.

RC Yes, yeah, yeah. They were just, in the summer of '54 they were starting to do aerial reconnaissance. You know, look for a fire after a lightning storm and go through. Then they'd put guys on a plane and they'd go out and fly and look for fires and when they found a fire, then they'd jump. And the idea at that time was they thought they could do that more economically than keeping lookouts manned. But they were just starting to do that in '54 and I don't know, now obviously have very few lookouts that are manned except at the height of the fire season. At that time, I think lookouts were manned pretty well from mid-June till mid-September.

RG Did any of the people who smokejumped, that you knew, ever man a lookout?

RC Yes, but I don't recall who.

RG How many of the people that you smokejumped with, do you believe went on and worked for the Forest Service or involved themselves with forestry?

RC Oh, probably about a third of them were foresters and went on into. There was a lot of, you know, like myself, I was history and political science, and music majors and that kind of stuff, you know. Most of them were students and... it was a lot of the forestry students did go into the jumping and then they, and went on and worked for the Forest Service as a career. And there's some, oh like Hal Samsel. There was, I was in the ROTC program, it was four or five guys out of the ROTC program and after they'd graduated, went on to the service for... two years. You know Jack Demons? He's here in town, have you talked to him?

RG No, I haven't talked to him.

RC He was

RG I've heard his name though.

RC No, Bill Demons, Bill Demons, not Jack, Bill. There was three or four guys out of ROTC that jumped.

RG Were there any situations that you were involved with as a smokejumper that have affected you for the rest of your life?

RC I don't think so. No, a guy just remember the ones that scares him.

RG Did your wife have any apprehension or anxiety about your jumping?

RC She never said anything but uh, I remember pretty distinctly and she tells me about the, we were married the fall after I started jumping. And there was a late fire up in the, I think it was the Bob Marshall [Wilderness] and they took us. Asked us and we got some time off from school to go fight the fire. And obviously we got dirty like you always do and you're, you know, literally you're black-faced from head to toe. And my wife almost didn't let me in the house when I came home, [laughs]. She, course we'd only been married about two weeks. She didn't know whether she wanted to let that guy back in the house.

RG Oh, that's great. How common was that for you to be called out after the season was pretty much over?

RC Oh, once in a while. I only got called once, when we went into the Bob Marshall, watched the elk bugle. But it wasn't terribly uncommon. It was more for rescues than for fires because usually by September, the fire season is over. You've got rain and it's out but I was called a time or two to go on rescues. But for some reason we never went, you know. For, like hunters and hikers and that kind of stuff.

RG As a smokejumper were you obligated then if they needed you for rescue work, to go out past the fire season?

RC No, no, just a personal commitment and of course you got paid so... a hungry student who always wanted to make money.

RG Right. Did you ever feel that the smokejumper organization was in a transition while you were jumping?

RC Well, the big thing that was going on then when we were changing from the Nine Mile operation to the operation out at the current smokejumper's center. See that was opened in '53, so I'm sure there was a, you know, but I was just a flunkee so I didn't get involved in management decisions. But I'm sure there was a major transition to go from the ranger station.

RG Do you keep up with any of the people that you first, or that you jumped with?

RC No, I know some of them and then some live here in town that I see occasionally but I don't have any relationships with them. I don't, just, of course you know, when I graduated and went in the Army and lost everybody and I just never see them. I see them occasionally here in town.

I thought of something I might tell you about, a kind of funny story. In the summer of '53 when they opened the jump center out here, there was some VIP forest people come from

Washington, D.C., to see the new jump center. And there was oh, a dozen, 15 of us that was working in the.... packing chutes in the loft. And of course you've got the big, long tables and got the tower in the end. And so we, all of us got together and we decided we would entertain these VIP's when they came to see us. And of course we didn't tell the boss.

And we all had different animal calls that we had, was our favorite animal call, there was a coyote and a squirrel and a crow and all those kind of things. And Fred brought these three people into the loft and of course the loft was, you know, is the most interesting thing to see, really, at the jump center. And when he brought them in, we all gave them our favorite animal cry, [laughs], and Fred and the three VIP's turned around and left. Fred never said anything but I often wonder what those people from Washington thought about us nuts.

RG That makes me want to ask you if there was a good measure of just jest among the smokejumpers?

RC Yes. We had a lot of fun together. Worked hard, played hard, had a lot of fun.

RG Mmm mmm, yeah, that's great.

RC We gave all the ground crews that walked into our fires a bad time.

RG Were there any traditional parties or initiation rites for first year jumpers that you remember?

RC I don't recall that at all.

RG There weren't any traditional bars in Missoula where smokejumpers would rendezvous?

RC Well, could have been. I'm one of those people that's a teetotaler so I'm not a great party person. But I don't recall at all.

RG Do you have any thoughts about the changes that have, some of the changes that have come about in smokejumping, such as women jumping?

RC Well, yes, I do feel very strongly. There's no question a woman can jump, but there's also no question a woman is not physically strong as a man. And I would hate to be teamed with a woman on a jump, because most of the jumps are two person jumps. From the point of view that if I was physically incapacitated, she couldn't carry me, or very few women can carry me. I know one of the gals that jumps out here and she's a very nice person and I'm sure she, you know the jumping is not the problem. The fire fighting is the problem and the other hardly even goes with it and ... I guess I'm a male chauvinist. I don't think they belong, I don't think think it's their work.

RG Right. Would you have ever imagined in 1952, '53 and '54 when you jumped, that women would one day be jumping?

RC No, it didn't make sense.

RG Right.

RC Then, and I don't think it makes sense now, [laughs].

RG Are there any other changes that have occurred in the smokejumping organization?

RC Well, I, yeah there's something going on right now that they're, the Forest Service is reinventing the wheel. At that time, '52, they had just brought in all of the, they had little jump stations here and around. And they decided it would be much more economical and practical to have it consolidated in one point. And now they're in the process of doing it over again and send them all out to the little places. And to me it just doesn't make sense to have crews scattered around because that's the purpose of airplanes. They can get you there immediately and if you have your, one operation, one overhead... much more practical to run that one central facility than run five or six little ones.

RG So you thought the way that the main base was managed in 1953 and '54 when you were just stationed there was a pretty practical approach?

RC Seemed to me, yes. Even with old Tri-motor Ford that would only make 45 miles an hour climbing. You'd go the Bitterroot Valley and cars would pass us on the highway, [laughs].

RG Do you know the reasons, the reasons behind the Forest Service doing that now?

RC I, they say it's because it's better management in having the crews closer to the fire. But you've still got to fly them and uh, I don't, I'm not sure of all the details but I'm sure the, will just turn over again 30 years later. And they found it didn't work '50 and '51. I don't think it'll work now. I don't think it'll be economical.

RG Are there any other thoughts or memories or stories that you have that you'd like to share with me, today?

RC I don't know, I don't think so. I... it was a, it's a pleasurable experience. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The main thing was the tremendous crew of people, there was no, no Forest Service, no fire crew that ever could build a line as fast as we could. And, you know, they prided, we prided ourselves on being able to work that hard and that efficient and work that well together and... a very pleasant memory.

RG Well, I'd like to thank Richard Clearman for taking the time to tell me about his experiences as a smokejumper.

END OF THE INTERVIEW