

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: [Archives and Special Collections](#)

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.

Oral History Number: 422-212, 213

Interviewee: Wes Kesterson and Colleen Kesterson

Interviewer: Suzanne Vernon

Date of Interview: October 9, 2009

Project: Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project

Note: The beginning of this interview consists of chit chat, and random comments about when Colleen first came to the valley.

Colleen Kesterson: . . . it was a plywood floor and someone had fallen through it so it was just tacked. My mom said what are you doing up there! I thought it was wonderful. (Talking about the condition of the Salmon Prairie School teacherage in 1973.)

Suzanne Vernon: (I noticed Colleen was referring to Wes by a nickname.) What did you call him?

CK: I call him Charlie. Do you remember the song Good Time Charlie's got the Blues? Well, that was "the" song when we were going out, so I started calling him Charlie and it stuck. I blame it on that song. That was when Conley's were asking me when I was going to have twins! That was because we got married so quickly.

SV: What year did you get married?

CK: 1973. That's when I moved here. Well, in January we got married, and Conleys said, when are you having the twins? And I didn't have a kid for 12 years. Fooled them, didn't I?

SV: Where did you go to school at?

CK: Billings, Eastern and then MSU and then I graduated from Western, which I liked the best. I went back there and got my reading endorsement and . . . they had to get my records out of the archives.

SV: What are the changes and how many years did you teach here?

CK: I taught three and a half years here and a year and a half at Swan Lake. Teaching all eight grades, it was like teaching twenty years. I got so tired. Those kids were really a handful.

Then I started 28 years later, and I can see that I learned quite a bit in those four and a half years.

SV: 30 kids in all 8 grades? How many at Salmon Prairie?

CK: Probably like 10 or 12.

SV: Swan Lake school isn't even open now, is it?

CK: Charlene was in school when it closed, the 1990s probably. They sold it to . . .

Then they sold it to the Search and Rescue. Every year they had to have someone shovel that stupid roof. They hired some architect, and he said, do you have snow here?

Wes Kesterson: Did you copy all of these photos? (He's looking at the copies still.)

SV: Yes, I did them the night before July 4th that year you let us display the pictures.

CK: Your mom would approve, wouldn't she?

WK: Oh yeah. There's old Cubby, the pet bear.

SV: Tell me about the pet bear.

WK: I can't. I wasn't born even, then. I just heard that they didn't have him very long and they had to turn him loose. He was an ornery little turd.

CK: And they had a pet fawn, too. It jumped in the river with its mom. Malcolm went in the river to save the fawn. Raised him clear to where it got to be a big buck.

WK: It was about a four point.

CK: Yeah, they had a big thing around his neck so nobody would shoot him, but. . .

WK: We know who it was.

CK: Did Malcolm find him dead?

WK: No, they admitted it.

CK: So saved in the river to be killed in your childhood. There's a deer around here with three fawns.

WK: And here's a picture of that _____ again.

SV: Leita Anderson said she could identify all of the teachers in that album.

WK: Well, Mom's got a list of teachers. We've got it. Joyce, the retired superintendent, asked us for that list. I run onto them here a while back.

CK: Are they upstairs in the gun cabinet?

WK: Yeah.

Two foster sons: Tran and he calls himself Charlie. And the other is Kenny, and we always called him Tay. We adopted

The Meyers got them from Lutheran Social Services, and it didn't work with their adopted kids. I was working with them at the school. I asked Wes if he wanted to take them, I didn't have any kids and I liked them a lot. That was in July 1980. July 5. We were up here at the Fourth of July and then we had to go in and do a witness thing, and they were told by a translator that they were coming to our house, and they were just (thrilled!). They were Vietnamese but they had Chinese ancestry. Tay stayed until 1996. Tran had to head out. He stayed five years until he was 18. They went to college half a year in Missoula. There was a little prejudice there.

What was the best thing?

WK: The experience of the whole thing. It was pretty interesting.

CK: The other foster kids, like, pulled knives. They were really rough. And Tran was telling me he would have done the same, but he really leaves it to Wes who led him on the straight and narrow.

WK: They call, still, and send birthday cards.

CK: And just dealing with the culture. They were really sad they got shipped over here. They'd get really sad and bawl. Especially Tay, he just didn't understand why he was sent over here.

SV: Did anyone ever explain why?

CK: No, just what we heard from the kids. They (?) paid the communists so much money and nobody has a clue why they picked Tay and Tran, they had eight other kids. They got on this little boat and there were sharks and whales and the pirates from Thailand. They were like five years there, Malaysia. No wonder they got tough, you know? Tran had to take care of Tay. They ate sardines every day, so they hated sardines. In Malaysia, they had little tarps, (for shelters?) for a couple of years. They were with cousins for a while, and then they got sent to California. And then they were on their own.

WK: What saved Tran was when he got to work at Rustics in the summertime.

CK: He kept asking, when can we do that?

WK: They just wanted to make money. But I kept him out of trouble quite a bit. Every night he counted the money. He could save it, the other one never could. As fast as he got it he'd spend it.

I know when we first got them, he asked me if I had anything he could do. He couldn't talk (speak English) very good. I had a bunch of little logs out here, about twenty-five of them. I said, "I'll give you ten bucks if you peel them." I thought that would last him all day, keep him outta my hair. It wasn't two hours later and he was back in and asked, "Do you have any more?"

CK: The chips were just flying!

WK: I just showed him how to do it and that was it, he was on his way.

CK: He had so much energy, that was it.

WK: He peeled every log in here (in the house). I never peeled one.

SV: That's a lot of work!

WK: But like finish work, he could not do it. I tell you, the youngest one, he was more the artist. He could do that. He didn't like peeling, but he liked building. He was building on the house. (Wes and Colleen built themselves a log home about the time that Tran and Tay moved in with them.)

CK: He made that shelf in shop class (points to a bookshelf in the living room), and the coffee table. It (the shelf) was the biggest project that came out of Seeley Swan (high school).

WK: We didn't know if we could get it through the door.

CK: So Wes cut it in half, and put half of it up stairs.

SV: How old were they?

CK: Tran was older, he was like 13 . . . We were in the trailer house then, and we were building this (log) house. Tay was a year younger. Maybe that's why they sent them, they were closest in age. Tran wasn't the oldest (in the family of eight children). Maybe they just did eenie meenie miney mo

SV: Did they wonder about their family?

CK: All the time. They didn't tell us, but I guess the communists moved into their house and the kids moved into the jungle. They don't talk about that. (The kids did go back to Southeast Asia after they turned 18.) But, now they are back, the dad has died. They (the family) had a tea

business. But it's a whole different economy over there. It doesn't take as much (money?). Now the younger brother has the tea business. Tran would like to go back over there, but I don't think Tay would. (Tay has his family, wife and children, in the United States. There are pictures of Tay's kids on the refrigerator. "They are smart. One's going to be a doctor.")

WK: Tay said he'd go (back to Asia) in a minute if he didn't have his family here.

WK: Then we had Charlene.

CK: Sometimes that works, you know? You adopt or foster, then you have your own kids. Tay and Charlene (Kesterson) got along.

SV: So the younger one who stayed here, what did he do?

WK: He worked for me. I had him working down there with me.

(Hard to transcribe)

SV: What advice did you give them? Can you remember things you told them?

WK: Advice?

CK: You gave them a lot of advice. Don't you remember that time you told him (?), "You appreciate your brother. He'll take care of you." I think you showed them, more. Remember one time in Seeley they called us at 3 o'clock in the morning?

WK: I always told them that, if you need me, you call me, and I'll come and get you. You call me. He said, "Man oh man, it's good to see you." I had to do that with Charlene a couple of times.

CK: Teenagers! Now I see it in the seventh and eighth graders. (Colleen works at the elementary school.) They have that attitude thing, just too cool. I have the sixth graders at school. There's a gap between sixth graders and the eighth graders.

SV: (to Wes) What year did you graduate from Seeley high school?

WK: '71. My one sister did her senior year there. The other years were in Bigfork.

CK: I'm older than everyone. I took 12 years to have a kid, so I was always older than all the other parents.

SV: Tell me stories about your dad. One of the reasons I'd like to hear the stories is because all of the other old timers who grew up here in the 1940s and 1950s all remember him. We need more . . . what did he do for a living? I hear about his truck a lot.

WK: Do you want me to start right from the beginning, with what I know? He left Nebraska when he was 12 years old, on a boxcar, and he wound up in Great Falls Montana.

CK: He was born in 1919.

WK: He worked in the farmers' fields, wherever he could make money. He maybe just went through fifth or sixth grade. He left because he couldn't get along with his stepdad very well. He'd a killed him if he didn't leave. That's what mom told me. He didn't say that. He worked in the sugar factory in Missoula or Great Falls. Then he worked on a dam, I want to say Hungry Horse, but I don't know if that was it or not. I might have that (information) somewhere.

CK: He got hooked on the coke. (?) It might have been Hoover dam. Was that the CC's?

He came here, and met your mom. Then, because your mom was so much younger than him, he had to kind of wait for her.

WK: He came up here with Tommy Hulett and John, and that's where he met Mother.

CK: She was like 13 . . .

WK: Tuffy Anderson (Later married Leita Clothier) was kind of sweet on my mother. They went to school together and everything.

Then World War II came along, Dad was going to get drafted so he enlisted into the Navy, and then Francis was born. He didn't get to see her until she was at least . . . he got to come home on leave.

SV: They were married before he left . . .?

WK: They were married before he left.

CK: I think it was '41 or '42. This was a funny joke. They were married on October 2, and she (Francis) was born on October 4 the next year. That's how I remember her birthday.

WK: So Grandma was here . . . and then they had the mill. . .

SV: Which grandma . . .

WK: Fina Johnson.

CK: She was pretty well known. She sounded like a real humdinger, and I missed her. (She died before Colleen came to Salmon Prairie.)

WK: And then that old tractor we seen in here (in the photo copies) – we still have it down here. (Looking at pictures)

SV: But that was a car . . . ?

WK: It was an old Ford engine in there. Grandma said, “That ain’t going to work,” and Dad said, “You watch.”

CK: He was quite inventive for not having been to school.

(Edna and Buck built and lived in the old house next to Wes’s shop, alongside the Salmon Prairie Road.)

WK: And then they started logging and Mom went out in the woods with him. Between the farming, here, and the logging . . .

CK: She liked it. She said she wished she had been a man

WK: Dad would do the falling and the skidding and she would do the bucking and (on?) the landing. Dad would do the hauling mostly at night, in the evening. But he worked quite a bit for Uno Strom, and Ray Fenby. That’s where you see them old Diamond T trucks (they belonged to Fenby or Strom, in the old pictures). But Dad had him an ol’ Mac when he started on his own. Then they got a Five (5HD5) and then they got the HD9.

SV: What’s a “Five”?

WK: 5HD5, it’s a front-end loader. I still got it down there. It still runs. The Mac is a Mac truck – a short logging truck.

SV: So he was driving their trucks?

WK: No, he had his own but he’d haul lumber for them, to Missoula or Kalispell.

CK: The lumber for that house (Buck and Edna’s) came from Uno’s.

WK: My mother built most of that house.

SV: Did she learn the carpentry from her dad?

WK: She just had to learn it.

CK: Her dad died when she was nine. She had an older brother . . . (Arnold)

WK: Uncle Arnold was killed. He'd just bought that Jeep brand new. I think I was three years old. It was 1955 or 1956 he got killed.

SV: What killed him?

WK: He went to work on Thanksgiving Day because . . . by himself.

CK: He didn't come back.

SV: Was that where he cut the tree down. . .

WK: Well, falling, yeah, I guess he was checking. . . he had one of them old McCullugh's (saws) that you had to push the oil to get it going, and he had his head bent over the bar and this little snag came down and hit him in the back of the head and drove his head through the chain.

CK: I guess his head did not come off. She wanted to see him . . . his mom . . . Fina . . . but his head wasn't off. Somebody had said that.

WK: But it cut half of it. That's what I heard. He was revving it, the saw. I can still remember it. We was all setting around waiting, waiting, waiting. So finally Mom and Dad went and looked. "We better go look." So that Thanksgiving sucked.

CK: Would it have helped if somebody else had been there?

WK: It broke his neck instantly when it went over that bar. Broke his neck before his head hit the chain.

SV: So it was a snag . . .

CK: Widow maker.

WK: You know, I fell in the woods for years. And you can, if you ever go out in a lodgepole patch and you just sit there and be quiet on a dead day, and you'll hear them go over. Every once in a while, a snag will fall. You try that some time. Just go out there and just sit.

CK: I hear them in a wind storm, that cracking sound.

SV: Leita said, about Thanksgiving Day, "They had a way of making us remember." He was older. I've seen pictures of him.

CK: He was older than your mom (to Wes).

WK: They had an accident that I never knew about for years. He (Arnold) shot Tuffy's brother. I never ever knew that. She said, "I have something to tell you." Mother told me about it.

CK: Nobody pressed charges. It was kids.

WK: I guess Arnold packed him all the way from up there, on the Foothills Trail Road, packed him.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Off tape on Digital:

SV: I asked Helen Brist to tell me that story, but she didn't remember the details.

CK: She was one of Edna's good friends.

SV: So that's where I heard the story, and I think Leita tells it now. But it wasn't told until your generation.

[Tape 1, Side B]

CK: That's kind of how that is, it is, isn't it? The things people don't talk about until it's kind of in memory.

WK: I don't know, they were grouse hunting or something. It was just a twenty-two. But that's all you need. They was always grouse hunting together, they were best friends, they did everything together.

CK: The kids around here, and of course, his mom, would go to the top of the mountain, just for a hike, and be back by noon! It was just a hike for them.

WK: My Grandma, she used to walk from here to the ranger station. She did the cooking. She stayed there through the week, somebody told me. But then Mom had to stay by herself, and Emma, (her sister), down there.

SV: When they were little?

WK: Yeah.

CK: Their mom worked at the Forest Service (Fina Johnson) because the husband had died, when Edna was nine.

WK: He had a heart attack or a stroke. . .

CK: . . . and then he got pneumonia. They had to take him to Polson in the winter.

WK: He's buried in Polson.

SV: What was his first name?

WK: Einar (CK spells it out).

CK: I have a copy of the paper (homestead document) where they settled up on the lands, they had it at the library.

SV: So it would be the Einar Johnson homestead.

WK: To get back to Dad, he always did things for people and never asked for nothing.

SV: That makes a lot of sense, because everybody has talked about him . . .

WK: They might get a jug of whiskey and go up and give it to him, but he'd never take pay. He'd come home a lot of times at night, and get in that old Cat because ol' Jim and them (would) need plowed out down there. And Mom behind in the Jeep, with the lights, going all the hell the way down to Fox's and back.

CK: He used his Cat, helping people. Tell about fixing the bridge (over the Swan River at Salmon Prairie).

WK: He saved the bridge, two or three times. And all he got out of that was a set of tongs, that you can't even lift. Big huge tongs.

CK: Who gave them?

WK: The County. They said, "You might as well keep these." That was the old, old bridge, though.

CK: Wooden bridge.

WK: It was during the flood. Johnny, my brother in law, dad, had both Cats on there. Held onto the one cat to keep from pulling the other cat into the drink. You know, all the power of the water then them logs coming down there. But the County . . . well, Dad would say, "Shoulda let the sonofabitch go."

SV: Neil said Buck stayed there all night.

CK: That's cool that other people tell these stories. We used to hear them around the supper table.

WK: Yep, all night, over there. He was there all night, and I ain't so sure that he wasn't there the next day because it was still coming down. He'd go over and clean it out.

SV: Taking the logs out. Jerking the logs out.

WK: I remember there was a heck of a pile there. Of course they wouldn't let me over there because I was small.

CK: But the people the other side of the bridge, they couldn't get out.

SV: Well, there used to be a road out back.

WK: Yeah, the old Beck Bridge was there, but man the road to get there was, geesh.

CK: In '64, when you had the flood.

SV: At that time it wasn't used at all.

WK: It was so ruddy. Dad never got to see the new bridge, did he? Nope.

CK: No. He died in '76, and Charlene was born . . . (can't hear)

WK: Died of heart attack. He had his first heart attack at 42, and the second one, that's, I guess, where I learned how to start. We had a job up at Owl Creek. Maybe I told you that. Charlie Goff was the forester. We went around all these clearcuts and stuff and getting all the salvage. Charlie, he'd mark them. He worked for the Forest Service. He was a heck of a guy. Then we just went in. We went all the way from the highway, from the Owl Creek Loop Road, all the way to the Packer's Camp, with that Five. We started at that end, then do everything, all them clearcuts and around them.

CK: The Cat doesn't go very fast.

WK: We had both of them up there. And then that's when Dad had his second heart attack. I was a freshman, I think, in high school. I was either a freshman or sophomore.

SV: This was in 1976?

CK: No, he had a heart attack way before he died. In his forties.

WK: And the end of the sale was coming up and we couldn't finish it. And Charlie said, "Well, we'll just set everything here and then we'll come back next spring. We'll put an extension on it." So that's what we did. Dad still wasn't in shape to do it. So, that's when I started learning how to fall trees. I did the falling and the skidding and the bucking.

CK: He had you working with them before that, when you were only 12. Remember, the kids used to say you want to go swimming, and you had to keep working in the woods.

WK: Oh, yeah. I started when I was, with an ax. I was always with Mom and Dad. I was always with them in the truck, and they called me Little Joe.

CK: But you weren't responsible for all of it!

SV: Why did they call you Little Joe?

WK: I don't know. Dad always did call me Joe.

CK: He had a nickname for everyone.

WK: And Malcolm was Lum (?) and Manuel was Olie, and Francis was Pete, and of course Sharon was Tubby, until in her Senior year and he started calling her Sis. Mom said that was enough of that.

You know, I never heard him call none of us by our real names. And, see, his name was Tilvin (?) and nobody ever called him Tilvin or they'd a got their ass kicked. It was Buck. Nobody said that. Just like Elmer Dale (Conley). Dale hates Elmer. And I hate Wesley. I don't know why.

CK: But he always had it on the phone directory as Elmer Dale, and he could have said Dale.

WK: I like Wes, and Charlie, but I don't like Wesley. It sounds like a Black or something. I don't know where the hell they'd get them names . . .

SV: So you started out as soon as you were big enough, really.

WK: My first saw was an XL12, Homelite.

CK: Was it heavy?

WK: No, it was a little bitty thing. I did all the limbing and then, bucking with it. I did everything in the woods, except I never drove truck. Ol' Neil and Jim (Meyer) tried to get me to, but it didn't work. I swore I'd do anything, but I'd never drive truck.

CK: And the story about falling trees and then you fell the tree on your dad. Your mom never knew that story.

WK: There was a couple of them she didn't know. . . when I seen Dad about get it.

CK: Ok.

WK: But that one I fell on him. It was over on Lion Creek. Me and Dad was falling for Jim and Neil and for why, or for what reason I have no idea, just because we needed money I guess. But Don Guizzo was running the bunker and then, Adolph was feeding the mill. Tuffy was there, too, and Jim and Neil. That ol' mill was just a whining.

SV: You're talking about a portable mill?

WK: Yeah. I don't know if you've ever heard one of them big Jimmy diesels.

Dad said "I'll go over the hill here and fall, and you go up here." I said Okay that sounds good. I said, Stay there now. I was sawing away, I don't know, about a couple hours. I had this one . . . I never carried a wedge with me, but after this I did, but it went backwards on me, and I couldn't hold it. I thought, Oh Jeez, I just as well let 'er go. I turned around to look and here's Dad over

there bent over, falling. It was coming. I screamed to the top. I could not hold that. I tried pushing that whole thing. The only thing, Dad always watches, looks up. He was always looking up, cuz he'd watch the top. Hopefully he'd be looking up. I screamed, and it came down on the side, and he turned sideways just enough. It caught. . . the top caught him. It threwed him.

CK: Did he see it coming, because he was looking up?

WK: No, he felt it. He knew something wasn't quite right there. And Don Guizzo and them heard me scream, from down there, right at the mill. Dad couldn't hear me.

CK: He would have sensed that.

WK: All he said, was . . . well, I was in hysterics. Dad said, "Well, Joe, I think we oughtta go home. Call 'er a day.

CK: He was bruised . . .

WK: On the side. It took the whole side. If he hadn't of moved . . . It just kind of glanced off . . . actually the limbs did more than what the trunk did.

SV: What kind of trees were you cutting?

WK: Lodgepole.

SV: And that was the portable stud mill?

WK: Yeah, they had one and Bob Lewis had one. That's the one I worked for with Gordy Sellner. Uno Strom had one. George Gorman had one. He married Mrs. Strom.

SV: I never knew him.

WK: They lived in that house where Dennis Pike lives now.

CK: Did you interview John Hulett?

SV: Yes.

CK: But not Fred Kaser?

SV: No. I think Fred was gone by the time we moved here.

WK: There was the story, Fred's branding bees.

SV: Did you ever go?

WK: Did I ever go? (laughs)

CK: Didn't you fall in the fire?

WK: No, that was the senior party. No, old Jimmy, and Bob Fox and I – I was just little – and I was going around in back of them. They'd have them cups, you know, and they'd go like this and I'd take the cup and drink it.

CK: Of the beer?

WK: Oh yeah. Drink the whole thing. I'd go back where I'd been already and get another one. I kept doing that. Then after just so long, Dad says, "Well, Joe, do you think you've had about enough?" (Laughs.) He knew it all along. "Joe, do you think you've had about enough?"

CK: And he always knew where you were.

WK: Yeah, I couldn't pull nothing over on him and Mom. I'd tell 'em I'd run to Kalispell. "What do you do in Kalispell?" he'd say. "Oh just messin' around." Instead of Kalispell I'd go to Missoula. I'd get home and they said, "Well did you have a good time in Missoula?" How in the hell did you know. "We know you, son." That's all they'd say.

They wanted me to marry her, said she'd be the only thing gonna save me for staying alive.

CK: You had kind of a wild streak.

WK: Mom worked with Dad. Francis was at home, and then Sharon. We just took care of ourselves. Francis grew up and left home, then it was Sharon. Then me. Then when Malcolm and Manuel was born, well, that was the end of it for Dad, and social security. Mom worked at the school forever. (Salmon Prairie School.)

CK: Tell her about Francis making the fire with the kerosene.

WK: It was gas. She didn't think it would do anything. Blew her clear outside. Heating stove. We talked about that the other day when I was down there.

CK: Didn't it go up over the doorway, the fire?

WK: No, it just followed her right out the porch. It was a string of fire. She kept it out in the yard. Got the fire out.

SV: So Francis did the cooking?

WK: Oh yeah. She was in high school. Yeah we used to go down to Bigfork and pick up them every Friday night and take them back every Sunday night. Grandma stayed down there with them in Bigfork. They rented a place from Joe Eslick, he was the principal. They had a little log house there.

CK: Francis was watching these kids quite a bit, and they lost you. And the story where they lost you . . .

WK: I still say she's full of baloney. I think she woke up in her sleep one time.

CK: The story about you in the chicken house breaking all the eggs. . .

WK: She'd swear to that but I still think she's full of baloney. She shouldda took a picture of that then I would have believed it.

I know I went in the chicken house to get the eggs.

SV: So you had chickens?

WK: Chickens! We had three to five hundred chickens. Three hundred to five hundred different kinds of chickens. Mom and Dad brought them home, and Grandma. They were in the chicken business. We had pigs and we had ducks.

SV: How many pigs?

WK: Two at a time. And we had one horse. And we had about sixty, or sixty-five head of cows. Grandma had to have some turkeys.

SV: The cows were beef cattle?

WK: Yeah. And we had three milk cows, and I had to milk the cows every morning and night. I could milk cows, couldn't I?

CK: Oh yeah. The foam was this thick on it (shows several inches with her hands.)

WK: When we first got married we got ol' Jette's milk cow. We thought we could raise the beef, which we did. But the last one, we made such a pet out of him we couldn't shoot him so we sold both of them.

SV: Why did you have so many chickens?

WK: Mom and them went to this Henstrom deal or whatever it was and ordered all them chickens. Every different, topknots and . . .

CK: What did you Dad think?

WK: He didn't care what they did. The only good chicken he thought, and the same way with me, a dead one or have the eggs.

She wanted to raise chickens, and I said, "You just help yourself. I don't want nothing to do with them."

CK: So I went down a few times to the neighbor, you know, and cleaned it. It's a lot of work.

WK: It's a lot of work. And I had to clean those blasted things. It was a pretty good sized chicken coop.

CK: Some of them just roosted around. . .

WK: Some of them lived just all around, all over. I never forget the time I come home from school, and there's chickens jumping all over the yard. Their heads was chopped off. I was the happiest guy in the world.

CK: Did you do that?

WK: No. They didn't make us do that. It was always Grandma and Mom. Dad and I did all the . . . Then we had the one pig, and Sharon couldn't eat it because it was her pet.

SV: Did you ever have trouble with the bears?

WK: Nope, we only had trouble with one bear. It was in the middle of the night, in the spring of the year. There was this bear got into Mom's cellar. She just raised holy hell with that cellar. There was broke jars. And Dad tried to get him out of there without . . .

CK: It was really skinny.

WK: . . . but he just wouldn't go. He was hungry, so Dad shot him. That was the only bear that Dad shot. We never had any real trouble. Just like us. We've never had trouble.

Dana (Conley – neighbor) saw one just a little while ago, just up the road. And they used to cross right in here. Just kind of across from the river to the brush meadow over there, and then to Hulett's.

SV: Did you ever see things like tipi rings or signs of the Indians.

WK: They used to camp on the old eddy over here across the river, they used to cross. That's when Grandma would be up there cooking. Mom would tell some stories about them coming in wanting something to eat.

SV: At the old house across the way.

WK: Yep. They'd feed them and they always left something, blankets or something. They traded. Mom was always scared of them, but not Grandma. Grandma wasn't scared of nothing.

CK: She raised three kids by herself.

SV: Tell me more about Grandma. We know she had three kids. Her husband died. Who was the oldest?

WK: Let me think a minute. I think it was Emma (Later married Uno Strom), Arnold and then Mom (Edna).

CK: Did she work for the Forest Service, and later get Social Security?

WK: Yeah, I don't know when she quit. She was a doll. So funny. I wish Colleen could have met her. She barely got to meet Dad.

SV: Fina was from the old country.

WK: Oh yeah. She came all the way from Norway. So did her husband.

SV: Did she bake?

WK: It was wonderful.

CK: Except for the lefse and the fish heads.

WK: Oh yeah. And she liked the brains. She liked fish heads. She's just boil them. She's the only one that would eat them.

CK: And so did our foster sons.

WK: Oh yeah.

CK: When they were living in Vietnam, they had those. I just couldn't watch. They'd eat the heads.

WK: They'd eat chicken blood too. And they would eat head cheese. (hard to hear, maybe Grandma.)

SV: And the brains?

WK: Oh yeah, she'd cook them and put em with crackers. John Hulett, that was like a desert. He did that to that old bull that got hit up there. He shot it with a twenty-two, and he cuts off . . . I wondered what in the hell are you doing? . . . "The only thing that's left that's good on this dang thing." He was dishing the brains out in the stupid bowl, and I told him, "You lost me, fella."

CK: He can talk like John Hulett. I was so sick one time when he came to visit. He was talking about these "green" people and I was one of them.

WK: The greenhorns.

CK: He was really entertaining.

SV: He used to recite poetry, Robert Service and stuff. I wish somebody would have taped him.

CK: He had a great voice.

WK: I didn't know that. Dad always used to take Fred (Kaser) to town once a year. Old Fred Kaser. Pay his taxes and get his groceries. Once a year. One of his cows got red water, and he had to shoot it. Course he had to. . . said, "Buck, you gotta come up and bury my cow." It was a big cow. So Dad rattled the Five all the way up there. Dug a hole about ten feet deep. Threw that cow in there and buried it. And here comes Fred a couple of days later. Told Dad, "I gotta go to town again." "What, I just took you to town!"

And he says, "No, by God, I gotta go to town."

"Why?"

He says, "That old grizzly come in there and dug up that cow and walked off with it. And, he says, "Any grizzly that can do that is one big sonofabitch. I need a bigger gun."

He seen it out by the fence, and he had that one fence, and he said that back was about six inches . . . walking on all fours . . . was above that top rail. I seen him back there that time I was with my brother-in-law and I'm sure it was him. It was getting pretty dark, but . . .

SV: Well, that one at Lincoln was huge. So, it could have been.

WK: And Malcolm, and I was just talking about it to Jim was we went up there on Piper hunting, figured we'd just make this loop, and come back around. We looked at our tracks. "Huh." There

was a grizzly track in there. And Malcolm, "Would you look at this would ya?" We had them big Sorels on, and it'd fit right in that track. Me and Malcolm looked at each other. I said, "I don't know about you, but I think it's time to get the hell outta here." We sat in the pick up for awhile to see if he'd come on around. But he never. . .

CK: He was following, in your tracks?

WK: Yeah. We was pretty shocked.

SV: Big bears. They are finally confirming that those big bears exist.

WK: They do. Yep, they do.

CK: _____ saw one today. It was on the highway. A grizzly. Close to the school.

WK: Old Fred, I don't think he ever had a camera.

CK: He had a violin.

WK: I never heard him play, but I guess he did in his younger days.

SV: Did he ever talk about when his dad disappeared?

WK: All I heard is that he told them he was going to go get a pack of cigarettes. "Ok." Never did see him again.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

SV: Was the old house that your Grandma lived in a log house?

WK: That's the same one (as is in the pictures).

SV: Did she build it?

WK: Uncle Arnold and Uno (Strom) and Dad built it. Dad was in the Service.

CK: Wasn't that what became the chicken coop? Where she, your mom, was born?

WK: No, they tore that down. Then they made that into a garage, just a shed, I guess it was, like a blacksmith's shop.

SV: So then your dad ended up helping build the main house?

WK: Well, I think he was in the Service then.

CK: I pictured that he was there.

WK: I think it was Uncle Arnold and Uno. (Not clear. Discussion is confusing.)

CK: In the forties. _____. They had the little place. Your mom was born in 1924.

WK: She was born in the little house.

CK: What about Emma – I think she was born in Somers.

WK: I think so, too.

CK: They were in the Norwegian community up there.

SV: Helen Brist talked about some of that.

CK: Her mother, Mrs. Anderson, and Fina, were good friends, because they were both Norwegian.

WK: Oh yeah, they'd get to talking. . .

SV: Crazy days. Can you imagine living back here in those days, not even a road.

WK: Oh. I think that'd been neat. I could do that right now. Get rid of every damn thing that there was . . .

CK: Evelyn, you know, one of the Jettes? You know how they came in and they could hardly get the wagons in through the trees? That just blew my mind.

WK: And the first thing that'd go is that telephone. The telephone. And this rattling . . . (points at the refrigerator). That's another problem coming up. It used to didn't do that.

SV: Tell me about the log home business. It sounds like you were logging when you guys got married.

CK: Yes.

WK: Yep. And right after that that's when I ... I told you the story about Jim Busch. I remember that.

CK: It was a cold day, I remember that.

SV: You had been working out in the woods.

WK: Oh yeah, I worked in the woods a lot. I had a big hangover.

CK: It was a Sunday, it must have been. I just remember it was so cold. I remember that.

WK: I went up there, rattled up the Nine up there, and then I did the job, got pulled out, rattled all the way back. My head was just a hammerin'. Jim and Tommy knew I was in bad shape. Even then he (Jim Busch) said, "Well, Wes, I sure do appreciate this. Not every man would do this for anybody." What did he give me for that? A hundred or two hundred bucks? Maybe it was three hundred. And he said, "You need a job?" I said, "

Well, yeah." I had just got laid off. I was only laid off for about a week. He just said, "You come to work Monday morning." I said, "What do I need?" He said, "All you need is your lunch pail and gloves." I got stuck peeling logs at three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour.

CK: There wasn't much money coming in and there wasn't much pay from the Salmon Prairie School House, either.

WK: So there we started out.

CK: You did some eighteen years there.

WK: But then, I had to quit a coupla times. I went back to logging, I think, twice.

CK: And then he went up to Lolo . . . (to learn about logs?) can't hear. . .

WK: Did a house. I wanted to try to learn how to finish 'em. So that's why I went up there. They didn't ever come to work, so, I said, "Forget that." They spent a lot of time in the bar.

CK: He was always up there waiting for them. Can't hear.

WK: I said, "That's enough of this." So I came back, every time.

CK: Jim hired you back on.

SV: So you were there with the original guys Tuffy and . . .

WK: Oh yeah. Me and Tuffy, and Joe and Adolph, and the Indian, Kenny Paul, and Rusty, his dog.

CK: How long did you peel?

WK: All winter, and part of that next summer. Then I got to . . . he put me to work on Lynn Anderson's house.

CK: I forgot about that. Who taught you?

WK: Tuffy.

It was either Lynn Anderson or her mother. They (Rustics) built one for each of them. I know there was two of them. They wasn't the same.

SV: Tell me more about why you started your own (log home building business).

WK: Because that place was going down . . . too many divorces, and too many wives, and too many . . .

CK: Scandals.

SV: Jim Busch was out of it?

WK: Oh, yeah. He was the best one, him and Gloria. Jim Busch helped this whole valley a lot. Never paid much, but boy if you ever needed any help, just go to him.

CK: Yeah, we needed to borrow some money, and he gave it right to us, and didn't charge interest. I've always liked him because of that. He saved us.

WK: When I first started there, they moved from up there (at Lindbergh Lake) and he had this Chevy, some kind of a Chevelle, and it was a HOT thing. Here it was underneath about four feet of snow. That was when I first went to work for him. I says, "Geez, Jim, how much you want for that piece of junk there. That's kind of a neat car." "JUNK!! What the hell do you mean JUNK? Do you know how much money I've got into that thing, that's under the snow?" That was one car not a cop could keep up with him. They just let him go, and put a road block up at the other end. They'd never chase him. He'd just pay the ticket and away he'd go again.

CK: And read the mail while he was driving. That's why nobody would ride with him.

WK: Yeah, he did that one time when I was going from the highway . . . he picked up his mail and was going straight into Lindbergh Lake. He was sitting there driving, reading, doing about sixty. Geez. I believe that was the last time I rode with him. Man! I was scared to death. I don't even know if it had a seat belt.

CK: You had some other rides like that, too, with the Indian boys up at Rocky Boy.

WK: Yeah, that's more recent.

SV: What was the first home you built in 1992?

WK: It was Larry Marx. It was a building that Rustics was supposed to build.

CK: It was you and John Colburne, wasn't it?

WK: Yeah. He asked me if I'd build it. Because they took money down on it, half of it or whatever. So we made a deal and I finished it up. Well, I didn't finish it, I started it and built it.

CK: Down in this field.

WK: Yeah, down in this field here.

Then I had one (unintelligible).

SV: Where did the one for Marx go?

WK: It was in Seeley somewhere. That's what Larry did. It was right after that was his last house. Then he bought Rovero's.

SV: Did John work at Rustics, too?

WK: Yeah. I think everybody in the Valley did. I fired John at Rustics and hired him on for me!! (laughter) He was hard to keep sober but Man! Could he build. He was good. John was

excellent. He just had a mind of his own. All those guys worked at Rustics and then worked for me.

SV: Who?

WK: John and me . . .

CK: And George . . .

WK: No, not yet. I hired peelers around, like (Owen?) he peeled for me and Travis, and some of the kids, and Tran, a little bit. Nope, Tran didn't peel none for me, he was gone already.

SV: What did you call yourselves then?

WK: Three K Log Homes, it's always been that. Who come up with that? You?

CK: Bob Siloti did the logo.

SV: Tell me the story . . .

CK: There were three of us: Wes, myself, and Charlene. I never considered anything else. His mom used to call and say, "Hi, this is the one Kesterson to the three Kestersons, or this is the one K for the three K's."

WK: And of course that smart ass Rollie Matthews said, what does that stand for, Klu Klux Klan?! But then when Rustics was having their problems and Jim Roberson took over, and that's when everybody started coming to me. I had George (Welch) . . . there were ten of them. John, George, Tay, Steve, Bob Anderson, Jerry Vance, Malcolm . . .there was a pile of them, and Bill Shoupe, and

CK: And Rosen . . . We took a picture of them, the year that Malcolm died, they were all sitting on the boom truck. I'm pretty sure there were ten at one time.

WK: I've got it up in the shop down there.

SV: Did you have to do the payroll (to Colleen)?

CK: Yes. So much comes in but so much goes out. Payroll taxes, insurance, quarterly reports – I had help from Marty Kux, for income tax.

SV: Did you build one house a year, or . . .?

WK: We built like three or four a year. And we worked right up till we decided to quit. Our last house was at Placid.

SV: On the lake?

WK: Yeah. Bill Mackie said, I said up at Rustics, "Someday I'm goin' to have my own outfit." And Bill says "Yeah, you'll only last a month, if that." Well, just awhile back, I says, "Well, it's sure been a long month, hasn't it, Bill?" He said it wouldn't ever last over a month, and I said it's been 17 years. Yep, he said, "I was wrong."

SV: You were 18 years at Rustics and 17 years with your own? How many log homes have you built?

WK: I don't know but I wish I had a buck for every notch that I've done!

CK: Isn't that terrible? We just haven't kept that good of track of them. You know, we developed dealers. When you're in the process it takes all of your energy. Alaska, Utah, Arizona . . . some people would talk about it but it never happened. Oregon. Canada.

WK: We did one in New Mexico. I can't remember, girl!

SV: So you had maybe three to four a year, the upper numbers, but always at least one or two. What was the biggest one you ever built, square footage?

CK: West Glacier.

WK: It was a three story.

SV: Where did your logs come from?

WK: Wherever we could get them.

SV: There for a while it was hard to get them, they were coming from Canada.

CK: Or Utah. We had to ship them up on the train once, and then they got stuck in Canada. For some reason or other they went to Canada, and then the Canadians wouldn't send it down. And that was our last one, on Placid Lake.

It turned out they were excellent clients. They paid their bills on time, which I enjoyed, because if they don't pay . . . you still have to pay the taxes, payroll. (can't hear)

SV: I can't believe people don't pay!

CK: It happens. They have reasons. We couldn't go to court. It would cost you more than it was worth.

SV: So when you first started, were any of the logs local?

WK: Oh yeah, some were local. I got them from Bob Ford. (Who used to own Rustics. He was in the log business.)

And, the last ones I got were from Utah, they were spruce.

CK: That was the train episode.

SV: It just really bothers me that log home businesses seem to be something that could really work for people here, for a long time. . .

WK: Well, sure, if you can get the logs. But it's hard.

SV: What happened to the logs.

WK: Well, you can't them from Plum Creek any more. You have to put bids on them, and you have to bid so high (for Forest Service).

CK: (can't hear Colleen.)

WK: And then there's the poor old logger. I hate to say it, but when the poor old logger put bids out to do some logging, well then the environmentalists shut him down

So nobody's got a chance.

CK: (can't hear) I don't know how the log home businesses are doing in Kalispell, or in the Bitterroot. . .

WK: There's only one. Montana Log Homes is the only one in Kalispell going right now, and they are barely.

CK: What about Alpine? (Bitterroot?)

WK: They quit?

SV: So, were some of your logs coming from Canada?

WK: Oh yeah. I just dealt with Nick Oday (?) (log broker). Then I had a guy that I got a lot of logs from over in Thompson River. He supplied me with a lot. I had a lot of larch houses that I was doing.

CK: It's expensive. The trucking (can't hear). We paid out so much money, I don't even want to know.

WK: She used to say, "How much this time?" I know you have bills in here but I got bills out there, too.

SV: Tell me what kind of notches you were using.

WK: Full scribe, with chainsaws.

CK: You use the calipers, like a big compass. Then they have to chisel a notch. That takes a little doing, to get them smooth. We have a brochure . . .

SV: You started to say why you guys quit the log home business.

CK: Basically it wasn't profitable. (can't hear . . .) We ended up with a lot of debt. We might have to sell, or we are going to sell. And when Malcolm died. We bought his land and we didn't get it paid off. And with a teacher's salary, it's kind of tight. Pretty sad ending. You know you think about it, maybe we didn't make a lot of money, or come out smelling like a rose, but it was positive because we made a lot of nice houses for people. So that's the way to think about it. Not the difficulty. Because I'm sure everybody had difficulties, with the logging and stuff around here. People are having hard times.

WK: I think this center deal up at the . . . ought to buy me a four-wheeler so I can go up and down these roads and pick up the garbage that all these assholes throw out. I think that'd be fun.

SV: What are the biggest changes since you were a kid?

WK: Just people.

CK: Oh my gosh, there are so many more people, just since I've lived here.

WK: I don't even know who lives up this road anymore.

CK: Summer people.

WK: Up at Fred's, there used to be just old Fred. Now there's (he counts) one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight places around that.

CK: But they all have a nice view up there. Look how much it's changed since they homesteaded. That was just back in the wilderness days. You know, it was all horseback, and think about how long it would take to get to town. They didn't go to town in the winter.

WK: Not very often.

CK: You would go down to the school and have parties.

SV: Say that you guys move, and you retire somewhere (their house and land is for sale). And somebody comes up and asks, "Where are you from?" How would you describe the community now?

WK: Swan Valley.

CK: Well, where is that? (can't hear)

WK: That's what they say to Tay, in Philadelphia. He was building a little dog house. He went down and got a bunch of poles. I sent him a pair of calipers and stuff. He bought a bunch of fence posts at Home Depot or whatever it was. They asked him what he was doing, and said, "Where did you learn how to do that?"

"In Montana." Where the hell is Montana? (laughs) "Where is the Swan Valley, where is that at?"

SV: Would you still describe it as a small town?

WK: Rural area.

CK: But with a different level of people. Summer people, richer people. People that are just, original, are having a hard time hanging on.

WK: That's what my dad always said, "He said, Joe, you're going to see it. In a few years down the road, this place is gonna be nothin' but a rich man's paradise. And that's exactly what it is. It's just the richest can afford it. And it's going to move out everybody else."

That's what it is. There ain't no jobs.

CK: But I'm glad that they are buying up some of the land to keep it wilderness. They were talking about us people buying land and having it for wilderness, but we can't hardly afford our own place. So I'm glad it worked out, with that (Montana legacy) plan.

One of the new teachers that moved in said, “I don’t know why they want to do that. Why don’t they build some condos up here where people can live.” She doesn’t have the vision. She just thought it needs to be developed.

WK: We wouldn’t be selling, but it’s a personal deal. It’s because we have to. When we lost Malcolm, it screwed up everything.

CK: You have to believe there’s a plan in all of this. . . It’s interesting hearing all of this (history). It must be kind of cool to write that. You kind of see a gel, kind of thing. You can see it all together. All of the people who are connected, not alive anymore.

WK: Dad talked a lot about it. I wish I would have listened a lot more when I was younger.

CK: My dad told a lot of stories, too. (In Helena.) The Boones. (later she mentions Daniel Boone as being a relative.) He has stories about them, which I need to record. He has forgotten a little bit.

SV: Do it. You can borrow the recorder, or use a video recorder.

WK: Did you ever hear about Uncle Arnold shooting the grizzly on Pony Creek?

SV: No.

WK: He was back in there and he shot this huge grizzly. He went over, with the ought-six – I got the gun – Grandma give me his gun – and he opened the mouth, looked at the teeth, took his claws and checked them all over. Sat down on top of him, had a cigarette. And he thought, “Ah, damn. I gotta go home and get Dad and Mom.” To help him gut it out and take him home. Of course it was dark by the time he they rode back, so they took the flashlight. You’d think that they’d be smarter than that, but they didn’t take no gun. They got back there and the bear was gone. Mom told them guys, this is no place to be fooling around out here. We got a grizzly we don’t know where it’s at and we ain’t got a gun with us. So they went back, and went the next morning. They found it. It was dead, but it had got up, just nothing, and moved what, fifty or a hundred yards. It dropped over. If it had been alive it would have wiped them all out.

CK: You hear those stories of them coming up on the hunters.

SV: Why did he shoot it to start with?

WK: Well, they could back then. Probably had a bear license, permit or something. Maybe they didn’t need a license.

(discussion about whether they’d eat a grizzly bear, etc.)

WK: Not me, man.

SV: Did you eat a lot of venison?

WK: Oh, yeah, but not just that. We always butchered a pig, chickens. We always had chickens.

SV: So what's the best thing about living here?

CK: For me it's the tranquility. I like it. I need it. That's why I've stayed up here for thirty-six years, and he's been here for fifty-seven. And your dad always said, "Get out of the Swan Valley, you've got to earn a better living." He used to always say that.

WK: And he also said, "Don't ever own your own business. Just take your lunch pail and go to work, and come home and forget about it."

CK: We did just the opposite of what he told us.

SV: But he stayed here.

WK: Yeah, but not on his own will, I'll tell you that. We almost went to Canada. We went up there and looked at this place at Prince George. It had a mill on it, and a house that wasn't quite done, pretty much. It was nice. I was in grade school. They had the money and everything. But Grandma told us, "You guys go ahead, but I ain't going. I'm staying here." Well, Mom says, "Buck, you're going by yourself. I'm staying here with Mom." So, yes, we stayed.

CK: But your mom was pretty attached to this land.

WK: Yeah, but if Grandma hadn't of been here, she would have went. She would have went with dad.

CK: Your grandma was pretty important to her. All her life, that's all they had was each other, always doing things with her mom and Emma.

WK: Oh yeah, that's all she had. (Emma died twenty years before Edna did.) Emma and Fina were pretty close.

[End of Interview]