

Herb Oertli interviewed by Kathy Root on June 27, 1984 for the Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH# 133-79.

KR Smokejumper Oral History Project, interview with Herb Oertli on June 27, 1984.

[INTERRUPTION]

HO ... I've never heard about smokejumpers either, you know. I was on the forest squad.

KR How'd you hear about it?

HO Well, I was... I was working over at Moose Creek as Trail Foreman. I remember Moose Creek at that time was part of the Bitterroot Forest. So, I was down there at Bear Creek... I'd worked in up... upper Moose Creek, you know in '46... '47. I was down at Bear Creek working for Sid Ponpay. He was the Alternate Ranger then until... he sent us up to a fire. A fellow by the name of Dewey Secrist... Secrist... he jumped later too. And so, we walked about 15 miles up there and he said there was a couple guys on the fire... there was 2 Smokejumpers. We run into them and they let the fire get away. Them guys spent most their time down swimming in the creek. It was about 15 acres, I guess. I got up there and here comes a Ford. I watch these guys jump, I said, "What they doing?" The other fellow... he says, "Well, them are Smokejumpers, didn't you hear of them before?" I says, "No, I've never heard of that!" We'd left about 3 in the morning to get up there, (and I could hike along real good in those days.) So, we got up there not too much after daylight and here they were dropping... I watched them. Seen one guy had 2 chutes. He had a line over his... pulled his emergency. And that's where I met Big Fred Barnowsky So, I got acquainted with him. I asked him what they're getting, you know, for money and all that. I was money hungry, you see. That looked a lot better than walking... next year I was down jumping, see.

KR So, how old were you when you started jumping?

HO Oh, I was after a while... I must have been about... 21... 22 or maybe later. No, about 23 or 4 because I had worked for the district a couple years. Sometime about 23 or 4.

KR So, you were just doing district work before the smokejump?

HO Yeah, yeah, I was just a summer seasonal... we worked about 6 months out of the year. That was for the Bitterroot. Then I had worked for the Forest Service in '42 at 17. Then I went in the military.

KR That's probably earlier. So you came back....

HO Then after the war, went back in the Forest Service... been with them ever since.

KR Ever since, huh. Well, what was it like... I mean like your first year? You went into training, right?

HO Well, that stuff... yeah, that first year, you know... of course I'd had 3 seasons of guard school, you know. We had... it's similar training for fire fighting purposes. Map reading, compasses, and lookout work, and all that stuff. So, that... but I never rode in airplanes very much, or nothing. So I didn't know much about the jumping but I went down there and applied. Earl Cooley was... I went and seen him... I knew his niece, you know... and everything, because she lived at Corvallis and I went down there. In those days, they hired the farm workers, and the wood workers. Now it's all college students. Everybody grew up in the depression days and they learned to work when they was kids. You know, out milking cows before you went to school, and stuff. And that's what they hired. They knew what they were getting. They had got people that knew the woods to start with. And, ah... it made a big difference, I think, in the way it turned out later on, as I went through the years, and they finally went to forestry students and stuff like that. You had people that worked with tools all their lives. They grew up with tools. Whether... regardless of what you were doing. And you didn't have automatic tractors, you worked with a team. When I was a kid, I drove team all the time. And so, the guys had a lot of know how they didn't acquire any other way but being part of the scene. That's gone now. Everythings sub-divided and when you got a farm it's all automated. You've got good machinery. You don't go out there and dig ditches with your shovel unless you use a tractor. Well anyhow, I got on there and Jack Percel is the Ranger at Moose Creek, said he gave me a good recommendation. Went out there, of course at Nine Mile, to me that was, you know... I thought it was pretty nice because they had good bunks and everything and a good kitchen. Had, ah... cooked with wood, she did. She had a great big range. And that was part of the jumpers job in the spring, was to go out and make a years supply of wood. That's the way she... we done it. And yet... family style... we had about 150 jumpers out there when it was at it's peak in training, stuff like that. Then I made friends with Effie Brown. That's why you see me in this other picture in this New Mex, years later. She wouldn't have him behind the kitchen [inaudible], running around like that all the... "You're going to get hurt in there!" I says, "I ain't going to do it Effie, I'm going out and mow the lawn." You can see that she... get him in trouble, and I'd give her a lot of help. Everybody kind of snarled at Effie but she was was a prince of a person when you got to know her.

KR Well, so....

HO Well anyhow, I got the jump training, which was the only thing that was new, really. The fire training was... you didn't pick up in 2 months additional information when I had had 3 years experience at it and, ah....

KR What was jump training like?

HO The jump training was new. Bill Woods gave me my parachute training. We learned to roll, and I didn't know nothing about the parachutes and nothing else. So, anyway, I got through the safety [inaudible], made the first jump, and I took off from Hale Field in a Travelaire. And, ah, we jumped in lower Sweeney Creek. That's the first draw up Lolo Creek, going to the right. I was kind of scared all right. A fellow by the name of Ed Mercer was in front of me. And I got up and it looked awful high and I would have went home [inaudible] if he didn't jump out. They let him go and he made it and I know he was just as scared as I was. He says, "Now you got to go too!" So, I... I jumped out and I was surprised the chute opened, and everything. Right down to that big field, down there in Sweeney Creek. That was my first jump and I thought that that was all right. I was plenty scared but I was just as scared the next morning, too. Jumping out of the Ford. [inaudible] Travelaire and the Ford. It wasn't till after my third jump till I started to relax, I think.

KR Did you have static lines?

HO Oh, static lines, yeah. They were all static lines.

KR What was it like that first jump... I mean, you scared... do you remember it?

HO Oh, yeah, you're just scared, I guess. But you're also proud, though when you got to the ground and found out you wasn't hurt, you know. [Laugh].

KR Do you remember falling and do you remember looking around? Do you know how that was?

HO Oh, yeah. Oh, I didn't look... I just looked down to see where I was going. Of course, I didn't have to look for another jumper. The Travelaire only lets out 1 guy. In the Ford, you let out 2. Then of course, you have to look for the other jumper in the air, and you do that. But there's just one... I just had myself to worry about and I was looking down, watching that ground come up. When you're jumping, it looks like that ground comes up instead of you meeting the ground. I hit the meadow all right. It was a big one anyhow. And old Jack Nash, he's pretty [inaudible]... old Jack Nash, he's something [inaudible]... you know, he's kind of a first aid man, you know. [Laugh]. But, that was my first one and then that was a wet year. 1948 was considered the "Flood Year". We didn't have many fires and I was over at Dixie, Idaho with Fred Barnowsky. He and I ran around together a lot of places together throughout the years in fires and stuff. We was working over there... working on roads that had been flooded out till we got a call to go to Missoula, so we come back to Missoula. The next day we suited up, and Fred Bauer... he was jumping in charge and I... you know... we jumped in Roaring Creek, which is down there on the Salmon River... real rough country. You know, I'd never jumped out of a Doug, only once before and that was a jump load. So, we bailed out and had a fellow by the name of Quesenbury jump with me. We was about

good pass, I think. He broke his leg. [laugh] Oh, yeah, and I didn't get hurt at all, you know. But, anyhow....

KR Now where did you say Fred Brauer was?

HO Fred Brauer, he lives on Reserve Street, you know where they got that... right next to the Porter School. He's lived there all the time. He... eventually, he got to be Project Superintendent. Of all the superintendent's we had, I figured he was the best one because he expected a lot from his people. He kept them employed. He kept them out on them projects. Everybody had to work, not lay around. You produced and... or, he was fair. I remember one time, I dropped, later, two jumpers over in [inaudible] Ridge, that's below Dixie on the Nez Perce. And at that time there was quite a bit of rivalry between the Districts and the smokejumpers primarily. "Fine," I says. They figure that's where all the money's going, and they didn't have it, and they wanted to get it. So, I put Stan Norgaard, (he's the dentist in town now and he still fixes my teeth), and one other guy, I forget his name right off, and ah, I spotted them down there and they had a great big yellow pine that was burning there. It was a moose. Down on the Salmon, some of those trees get awful big. In those days, no power saw, just a cross-cut and pulaski and your shovel and your... the tools you had.

KR Two man cross-cut?

HO Two man, yeah, two man cross-cut. So, they didn't come in for about 3 days and they put in for overtime. At that time, you had to stop at the Ranger's office and get your time sheet signed. Get it approved. [inaudible] wrote a bad letter over about them. And old Fred... "We'll see about that." He went down to Dixie, got the razor, walked into the fire 12 miles, to see what happened and of course they had to split... the fire was inside and they had to split that whole big tree and it was a moose. All the way up and split it open. What I wanted to emphasize that; he stood by those people; that he found out... they were innocent until proven guilty, and if he had to go 20 miles to find out about it, he would look and see how much work was being done. That guy wrote a letter of apology, and that... the only guy I've ever known that went out of his way to make sure you didn't have copters going to fires. He went ahead and made sure that either they... later turned out. You see old Fred, you ought to interview him, too. He's a good man to see. At his job, he was the best as far as project master.

KR And he was your project boss at that time?

HO Yeah, at that time he was a superintendent. We had a couple in between. Earl left and went to Red River... and, ah...

KR Earl Cooley?

HO Cooley, and then, ah, Art Cochran took it for a little while. He's a... I've got some pictures of him cutting his hair

down in Silver City. And then he left, went with the C.I.A. And then Fred took it over. So, he really looked after the people. Yeah, he did, and he worked them too. There wasn't nobody gave him no guff but he was sure fair.

KR That's important.

HO Yeah, he was fair.

KR I've got to ask you, you know, when you... you first saw smokejumpers, when you were just doing project work, before you were a smokejumpers and you saw those smokejumpers coming down into the fire and then a year... you know, a couple years later there you are jumping, was it everything you thought it would be?

HO Oh, yeah. In fact, it... I didn't know I was gonna be that scared, though, on the first jump. [laughs]

KR Well stepping out into, you know, air....

HO No, I've never even had... I only had one other airplane ride in my life and that's flying into Moose Creek, you know. With the... probably the same Travelaire and I was scared flying... took off from Hamilton and went over. I was pretty scared about even that. So when I got up into the airplane that was bad enough and I looked down and I said, "Man! I don't think I want to get out of this [plane]." You know. [laughs] No, I wouldn't have backed down if it cost me my life. I said. "He went, I'm going." I did!

KR You said after about your third or fourth jump you started feeling comfortable.

HO Yeah, you know, not... you could think. You know, if an emergency come up, you could [inaudible] out... and, ah....

KR Most of the guys like that, I mean most of the guys...?

HO I'd say so and some of them I think a little more but I noticed it was after about the third before I, you know, I could sleep at night if I did know I had to jump the next day, you know.

KR [laughs] Oh, that's good, that's good.

HO But anyhow, that Roaring Creek fire that was a big fire. We was down there quite awhile and then we took boats and had those... they weren't jet boats then, they were still had motors on them. Didn't have jet boats when they come out the Middle Fork, at the mouths. And the road was there, come down the river you can't walk down, I thought that was all pretty nifty in those days, you know, that's awful steep country. And that was my first one... and the next time that, you know... that went down to Silver City... that was in 1950. And, ah, I've got some pictures here of that, but.... And then we jumped out at...

didn't go to Silver, went to Demming, which was about 50 miles south, you know. We set up in an old military air base that had been abandoned, you know. Had the old Noordyne, I got all those pictures in there. And it... take two jumpers and go up there and man fires all there because they didn't have nothing but a dirt... a little dirt 180 strip up at Silver. Later... now it's got a big strip, you know, that the airliners land on.

KR So '48 '49 and '50 those were kind of slow years, yeah?

HO Yeah, it was, but the reason I... I moved around, I went... I tried to go where the action was, if it was in Silver that's where I went. And I was gone from home most of the time, when I was jumping in the summertime. Either over at Green Hill or I would jump at Voyers... some... yeah, three and a half years, really, out of Silver City.

KR So you liked the jumping part of it; you liked the action.

HO Yeah, well I was looking for, yeah, I wanted... I was looking for the dollars, too. You had to work. In those... we started out we got \$2750 a year and there wasn't no time and a half overtime but you got paid for your extra hours and there wasn't no standby time. We used to stand around the loft out there. Well of course, we lived at the cow barn out there... you know, part of the fair grounds. And the kitchen was set up there. That's... later on we moved to the Fort, and there. At that time we lived out there in canvas cots and kapak [sic]. And you'd stick around. If somebody would go to town and you had a fire call, and you were next up, and he wasn't available, you took his spot. Right down the list. I used to hang around there get a few extra jumps doing that, you know. I needed the money! Yeah. And now they... of course, they pay them stand by. They've got this and that, but things were a little different then. But you didn't think about... I... they don't think we're... when we got on the fire I never worried about money as much as doing the job, and I think that the Forest Service as a whole was that way. The job came first, it was important, people doing their job. That was on the district level and anywhere else. You didn't need to be bossed, you went out with your trail crew, if you goofed off, nobody was looking over your shoulder. You never did... you put in a good days work and a little extra.

KR And that... and were you all, like you say, farmers or people who were used to...?

HO Not all of them, not all of them but that was the ones they picked on after the war, you know. Because you didn't have as many people, you know [inaudible] recall in colleges. And right after the war until they got the G.I. Bill going and stuff like that, it was more or less the wealthy people that could go to college. There wasn't much employment for young people to work themselves through, now you've got different things to do it. And, ah, they were the people that... and you had... everybody had these farms, chopped up, you had bigger farms. Everybody

worked them. And so you had work ability when they got there. And these other ones, you've got to train them to work. I know. I ended up taking over fire training. You... you had to teach them a lot, but you... but you... by the time you was twelve years old you knew as they did, because they'd never done nothing. Maybe mow a yard. Come from New York and all over, you know. They just didn't have no woods experience, lot of them were good men though. But they had to start from scratch.

KR Yeah, more training.

HO And that... except for that Grangeville deal, meant I... oh, we jumped there and our... out of Silver, nothing dramatic happened except at that time we always got the kind of a real reception wherever we was at. The jumpers would be broke whether he was at Demming... I mean, later on, at Silver City. Then we'd be in... we got "per diem" when we didn't have kitchens set up or anything you could go and sign your voucher and you could get a pair of boots, clothes, anything. Every merchant would honor a smokejumper and I don't think to this day that no smokejumper ever took advantage of that situation of... they didn't pay their debt before they left. And this is why you got such a reception from the town people, they... they was a little money coming in but they... they were pretty well behaved, more discipline then. Oh, you got drunken and rowdy once in awhile but not... not that anything too crude, you know.

KR Just on Friday nights, or whatever.

HO Yeah, oh, we were pretty careful not to overdue because you never knew when you had to go on a fire. We had a short crew. We only had eight of us; two overhead and six jumpers, you know. And you had them six guys doing the jumping. You... you might had to jump any time so you was pretty careful what you did, so you'd be able to help when you were on the next day. Yeah, if you weren't... they didn't hold still for any of that stuff, you had to be prepared. There was a limit to what they'd hold still for, and we respected it too. We knew we had a responsibility and we done it.

KR Yeah, so Silver City that was about '50 that you were over there?

HO No that was Demming, we was at... down at Demming then, at '50 and I was down there in '51 also, and then '54 and 5...'53 we went to Grangeville, [inaudible] crew, and '54 and 5 I jumped out of Silver City. We went up there in '54, maybe '53 I don't know, can't recall. I wasn't there, I was on the Grangeville crew. I forgot all those lady pilots, but anyhow, the only thing I ought to bring up that they were top notch people and.... and Floyd Bowman, he was quite a driver. He's dead now, he died of cancer. And I've got his picture and stuff in here, too. He... he knew her, 'cause he was... he use to fly aerobatics and stuff for movies and jump for movies, too, in the early day... long timer.

KR So where was it that you met the lady pilot?

HO Grangeville, Idaho.

KR And that was in 19--?

HO '53. They were up by chance, bringing an Indian crew up from Long Beach. I don't think they picked them at Long Beach, probably Arizona, or somewhere, but that's where the aircraft was from.

KR What were their names again?

HO Diana Bixby. And the co-pilot's name was Thurston... her last name was Thurston, but I can't remember her first name. And then she ended up getting killed flying a 8-20 up, bringing some produce up from lower California, [inaudible] the engines quit. But she was quite a driver... done a fine job. But anyhow after... that's in... I run out of jumpers and had a fire below Moose Creek and Roland Anderson, (he was one of my squad leaders later in New Mex.), he jumped out of Missoula because I couldn't cover the fire, and he come in and he seen these lady pilots and stuff... Bill Woods was squiring them around. And, ah... so, he told everybody about it over here at Hale Field. So old... next Walkey heard about it, and he flew over... he was taking pilot lessons. He flew over in a Cessna 120 and he landed there. I told Walkey, "What are you doing flying them lady pilots [inaudible]. Emerson called you and you said you could." He says "I thought they was kidding," he says. [laughs] I said "They're doing a top notch job." He says "You're paying them on a purchase order." He says, "You can't do that." I always carried a purchase order in my book. That would be like having food stamps now. You'd write it out, anything under \$5,000. Now they don't give you that authority [laughs] you've got a purchasing agent. I'd write off... pay them on the F.S. and charge their time to whatever fires they were dropping on; it was all legal as could be.

KR Sure.

HO She had to leave... she didn't want to. Yeah.

KR So how long did they work for you?

HO Oh, about four days before they got wind of it.

KR And then that was no more, huh.

HO That wasn't no more, he drove them home. I liked their flying. I says, "They're doing a top notch job." Bill Woods had them, of course he was the foreman, yeah. Yeah, then, ah, one time after that I was talking with Bill Woods and you get around talking to the different guys, you know, and, ah, just one guy that was with... Bill... I don't know what year it was... it was right along in the mid '50's or maybe '54, or something. We

jumped on a fire over here at the [inaudible], and that's really brushy country. There was 16 of us and he was in charge, I was the squad leader. So, he went around to scout the fire. It got dark and that brush was over your head, and was going through the brush. And I was leading the crew we was chopping brush and digging line, and I was the first man in the row and I picked up... a... I seen a wrist watch laying over there with my headset... in that thick brush, and I picked it up and put it in my pocket, you know. Later on we run into Bill and we set down having lunch, he start moaning about his wrist watch. I didn't say nothing, I just reached in my pocket and I said, "This yours?" [laughs] You know he wasn't having to blaze trail or nothing. I asked him if he still had that wrist watch. "No" he says "it quit running."

KR Sixteen men, that must have been a big fire, huh... St. Joe?

HO Oh, yeah, yeah, that was on the St. Joe, yeah. And it was brushy. I hate that country because of the brush. The Northern Clearwater's brushy too. But, ah, just one of the little things.

KR It was a little fire or a big fire?

HO Oh, it was about 15 acres, didn't amount to nothing to us. In those days you had a fire you stayed with it and worked until you got bit out, you know, or controlled and we got reinforcements the next day. We had a line to take care of, you didn't give up if you had to work 24 hours to do it. But the only other thing that was a little bit different was probably in '49 that's... had been... was on that helicopter project at Moose Creek and, ah... and that's when the Mann Gulch deal took off... blew up... we got a radio message then, to be ready for take off at daylight the next morning. And Jack Hughes was to come to Missoula, so the Travelaire come in and picked us up. I knew something was afoot but I didn't know what. So the four of us got in the thing, the Travelaire, and flew it to Hale Field. And then we suited up and got into the Ford. They wouldn't say what was going on, but I knew it was different. I didn't ask any questions. We were going to jump over there and, ah... and, ah... pick up those bodies. The reason they were kind of quiet about it there were two that were missing, they only found 11, and there... and, ah... there were two more that was missing. They didn't know two of them had gone out and Wag Dodge was all right. And so they were looking for... but they wouldn't tell us, just what was happening. And so, flew to Helena and... and Helena was spooked about jumping up at the saddle. They didn't want to, they said land. So we landed with the old Ford Trimotor in there, and Doc Little, that's the jumping doctor, he was there. Meaton said "it don't look good" he says and he told me about Hellman and DeSilva being in the hospital, they were burnt pretty bad. He didn't say much more. I didn't ask him anything. So we went down to Hillger, had to get on one of them scenic boats went up the Elkhorn, and Jack Hughes was waiting there with the copter. So I got in with him and went up to the fire, and I knew they probably had a dead body or two around. I didn't know

as I flew over the ridge that it was open ground, I could see the guys laying there. I said "Holy smokes!" I says, "They burned up the whole bunch." And that's the first I knew the extent of it. So I get up and jumped out with my tools, you couldn't quite land. Had to clear a few trees and prepare it up for the rest of the crew. So we split up in two different stretcher crews after awhile. Of course, we didn't have manties or anything. Jack could only move one body at a time anyway, and bring them uphill through the saddle. And we'd mark everything; nobody told us to. We put up mounds of rocks and marked every spot. We identified everybody, you could tell who they were, you know. And, ah, so Jack he... it was pretty hot that day and they had been since the day before... and so he said, "Go get something to wrap them with." And I said "Tell them to send up some manties, some canvas there, so we can roll these bodies in." So he did. Anyhow everywhere I went there was that big tall fellow following around taking pictures with a camera. I wasn't feeling too good anyway and, ah... picking those fellows up didn't bother me too much, but it was just the, kind of a shock of it all, I think. I says, "You look like a big strong fellow," (he wasn't real young or nothing). "Hey, Slim," I says, "why don't you quit taking pictures," I says, "and get a hold of this stretcher and give us a hand." You know. It turned out to be Petey Hanson, the Regional Forester. "I will if I can," he says. Later on I lived at North Avenue East and he was my neighbor across the street; he was a real prince of a guy, yeah. We had a lot of laughs about that, later when he got to know me, you know. Yeah, he never did forget it either. [laughs]

KR I bet not.

HO So, the last two we couldn't find. We moved them up and was still looking. I found one there but, again there... and I was looking for the last one to be Sherman from Darby. I went up toward this rock slide because that... Rumsey said that Sherman was right behind them. He says, "I don't know why he didn't make it. I think he just slipped and fell down the hill in the shale rock." And so I happened to see some shining I guess the big black log it was still smoking and I went down there and looked, I said, "What? What's that?" It... it... skull was showing through, white, and it... and his torso was... arms and legs were gone. That's the first time I says, "Man, I'm getting tired of this." He didn't weigh twenty pounds as we moved him up pretty easy, you know. That was the last one. If we could have stayed there we would have found them. At least that's, when they hit the press where everything was, because they said two was missing, I see in the headlines in this other book. And that were the two, that was the last ones because you had to pick it up. He drove it against the log of course, cremated him pretty much.

KR That was Sherman?

HO Sherman, from Darby, yeah.

KR Did you know a lot of those guys?

HO Oh, I knew them all but, you know, I can't... like, ah, Tol McBay he was a personal friend. Hellman, he was a squad leader. Silvia.... But I used to run around with Gil McBay partly, he's from Ronan. And I got pictures... I got pictures of his funeral and stuff, I went up for that... a couple of the others, too, but... but, ah.... Anyhow, one of the things that people didn't realize at that time that... when I was jumping they... my insurance as long as I was jumping or got hurt or killed or, you know, in the process of jumping, your insurance was null and void. That's true. We didn't have any insurance, and I think it was the outcome of this that these people are... are... were, ah, [inaudible] if we end up finally getting some kind of coverage. But actually when you analyze the whole situation and this was a clue field, Mann Gulch was anyway, I know a little more about what happened and... but, ah, you don't change the facts that they still lost 13 lives. One of them was a jumper the year before, Harrison. And I know what happened to him too but, ah, because the ranger was with him and he sent him up there to yank these guys out; he should have went himself, but he didn't like the looks of the fire. I worked for him later briefly they transferred him up there that fall and... but that guy got burned up too and he wasn't even jump so it didn't matter who was there you got it.

KR Well, what was it that happened at Mann Gulch?

HO Well I don't know I... I'd just as soon not go into it because I... I knew what had happened. They'd jumped quite a ways from the fire, and one of the things that did happen, if... they got pictures of it here... they stopped to eat, you know, because it was noon time. They'd missed their dinner, and they weren't... couldn't see the fire in the draw. And that's why... you just kid come up... and they all went... walked down to the river which would be a straight drop down the road. Well they got down here a ways, and then the fire had crossed here, so they come back up and the fire had crossed here and Wag... he looked around.... He's a good head... excellent fireman really. And, ah... and a good, good man. "Well" he says "I'm going to throw a match down here and we'll burn this off and get in the middle." He knew he couldn't outrun. One of the people said, "To hell with that." And he took a run for it and he's [Wag Dodge] the only one that stayed at the fire. If they had all stayed with that foreman there wouldn't none of them got no more than a big thrill because he... it burned off that sheep grass real quick. He laid right down and scraped a spot with his shovel and the fire just passed over him. It caught the rest of them. But it was the safest place on the fire, was right next to the edge of it. But once she gets rolling, you've got a problem. At least you know what it's doing and you can take precautions. And that's the only thing that happened really. Yeah! But, ah....

KR But that was a fire accident, not a smokejumper....

HO Yeah, it was it really had nothing to do with the jumping part of it. Like I said the darn guy got in there, and he got burned up anyway. Of course they didn't know it was... if you're familiar with the wind on the east side you've got to just about jump with the mark, you know, pretty much. Because the wind always comes up on the east side of the divide, you know. It's windy country, and that's about the time of the day it was real hot... light flash. Flashy fuels, and that fire they... just going right towards them that's all. And it... it got a big enough run, it spread out until it got burned, it was a pretty big fire, yeah. And it was just flash fuel. And I don't know after that it seems to me it was just... most of my jumping was just routine after that New MeOx deal.

KR Were you in the movie?

HO Yeah, I jumped for the movie. Have you seen the movie?

KR No I haven't; I'd like to.

HO Well the next... if you ever see it... now, I can tell you where I was. They had the Ford... we jumped out of the Ford up Pattee Canyon and they... like a lot of shoots I jumped on were dubbed too... but that were.... Everybody run out the door and you couldn't... all the chutes in the air at once which is something we don't really do, but we wanted an eight man stick out of four, and you can only hook up by stretching a static lines out about five, the last four had to... er three had to hook up on the way out Len Kraut, [who] was crew chief of the team, was in the door, which was as safe as this these, always a snap. I was the eighth man and you'll look I... I jumped and missed the step. I just... I was late... I knew they were carrying me by the spot. I hooked up and everything, but I jumped only twice.

KR Was that a pretty big deal...?

HO We had a lot of fun.

KR I bet you did [laughs].

HO Yeah, we had a lot of fun down there. Then I got the job of driving the... the, ah... the effect department, you know, where they put up the smoke and all this stuff that you see. And they got a... a mosaic plaster of paris slide up here at Hot Springs Hill lookout, just above Lolo Hot Springs, and stuff like that. And they'd have pipes back up there with diesel fuel in them; if they wanted a little more fire they just opened the valve, you know [laughs] and stuff. Well anyhow I got to drive him around. He was quite a drinker. I had a carryall and he said, "They, let's go see some of the country." He'd tell them other guys what to do and stuff. And we'd drive all over the country. "Well, we'll go up and see what they're doing up there." I'd take him down around Alberton and up the valley here up... everywhere that had a mountain road... he'd be sitting there drinking awful heavy.

KR Who was this?

HO Oh, that was the man in charge of the Effect Department in effects, special effects like, you know. And he was a [inaudible]. I would go up there and see how things doing on the hill. We'd go up there and [inaudible].

KR That had to be funny for the smokejumpers to see them do the Hollywood style of building a rock slide.

HO Yeah. Well we... we'd had a lot of bad luck, see. We started out... let's see there was Lund was going to be in it, then he got stung by... he was going to be the head dog... and then he got stung by a hive of bees and had to... face swole up. So they brought in Victor Mature. He got up there and got on his motorcycle... he wanted to do it himself... we had Buster Monty, was a good motorcycle man, he was supposed to be coming down around the road there. He got on... he wasn't going very fast... but then tipped over and broke his leg. He was at St. Pat's. So we ended up getting Richard Burton, ah... Widmark. I said, "Man," I said, "they're never going to get this thing shot." Just bring in another man and they have to shoot it over again because you've got a different person.

KR Sure.

HO Parts of it, a lot of it they filmed in Hollywood anyway, yeah.

KR So, what other... what other big fire do you remember around that time, '48, you know, in the '40's, '50's?

HO Well there was nothing much in '48, but really we had, ah... '53 was a big fire season. We had fires all over, but I didn't get on the ground on too many. I jumped on some that fall after I got back from Grangeville, you know, just on small, hunter type fires, but I never go much on the ground. I was too busy counting cargo and spotting, and taking care of the time sheets, and I had all that to do you know over there and we were really busy. Those guys really went onto a lot of fires in '53. They were busy out of Missoula and everywhere, of course. And, ah, well after that I don't think we had a real good fire season. And I quit jumping. That was in '61, we had the Sleeping Child burn. I was Fire Control Officer then at Missoula. I transferred up there and worked there four years as Fire Control Officer. And then they wanted a permanent dispatcher in Missoula for smokejumpers, and records and stuff, so I ended up putting the last ten years there. There's just one thing I might add, you know, that... Al Hammond and... and myself were the first two guys that ever retired on the firefighter's bill. I retired at 51, and that time I... I thought it was a pretty gravy deal, because I was still going to a fire once in awhile, you know, I wasn't jumping but, you know, on brush burns or ground fires and stuff like that I'd go along with a crew with [inaudible] in the office.

And then, ah, I started getting back trouble here And for about the last 10 years my back would give me trouble and a lot of things. And finally I couldn't walk... two years ago I couldn't walk see. The pain was that bad so they x-rayed my spine... I had old injuries under my spine. And I can remember hurting that back but I didn't know when. And I'd cracked up two vertebrae half way up and half way down. I never turned it in... had big spurs growing out, they [inaudible] but they weren't in [inaudible] and they got thick. Calcium got in between, pressing on the spinal column. And I had a couple other of other minor ones down below. I didn't know what had happened to it. So I had surgery in my back, and, ah... he says, "Man, you hurt that back awful bad at one time." I can remember having that burning sensation and going... I couldn't remember what had happened to it until I run into Larry Nelson; says "I know how you hurt that"... it was about a year ago with Susan and Larry Nelson, who's out at the loft now. Says, "You hurt that on the Hat Creek burn." Says, "You jumped with me." That was a big fire, about 5, 600 acres. He passed over me and I was underneath and he robbed my air. You get over... over... you rob it and I hit the ground extra hard, just come into a sagebrush hillside, and I rolled around. Says, "You were moaning about your back all night long." We worked all night. I had a terrible pain in my back, you know. And... and never had it looked at, never done nothing, but... but I wanted to point out that I can't do any heavy manual labor no more with my back. That it just... ain't got no pain, I can walk good, and hunt good, and so I'm pretty tickled over that. But, you don't notice those things until you get a little bit older. And, ah... I did hurt it... I can remember doing it.

KR So what you're saying is the smokejumping...

HO Yeah, it paid off... it, that, that... for me if I had to continue that heavy working I did... wasn't really doing it. You know, I could have stayed dispatch yet and stuff, but I had a chance to get out because I'd been active fireman for 25 years one way or the other. And, ah, so I had... had my time in so I... we left. But we were the first two to get out on that firefighting bill.

KR Uh huh.

HO So I... I don't think if you jump for 20 years that it... it's, ah... you do take a few rocks and stuff and you don't... you pay for it later in life.

KR Right.

HO And, ah, it ought to be as good as it... the fire department or police department that gets 20 retirement, highway patrol. I always look at it... not so much the hazards as, but just the fact that you do bang your body up. But remember we didn't have the chutes in those days you do now. You hit a lot easier and you get better chutes that we used to have. And, you've got a little better padding and junk like that.

KR Yeah, what was your... what was the chute you liked best?

HO Oh, well I never jumped... the best one I figured was a... was what we called the FS-5 because they didn't have these later models they got now when I quit jumping. It was 32 foot, they'd let you down... it wasn't quite as maneuverable, it was more of a slow... I like that slow descent. I figure it's close enough for me. I used to jump, ah, ah, those FS-5's, little bigger, they're the 28, and a 32.

KR Do they have the derry slots then?

HO Oh, yeah, they had slots. When we first jumped them they had the derry slots. And if you look back in there... and this history, I'll show you that. And Chet Derry and his brother they designed that so you could turn your feet around but we didn't have much forward speed. Then... that was the first one to jump. Then later on we put tail on them so it was clear back out the back and give you forward speed. And they been working on it; they improved quite a little bit since. But those chutes would let you in pretty darn... pretty fast if you wasn't careful. Then the only other thing that I can think of that was kind of a first for me is; I can recall that we used to worry about jumping in Yellowstone Park because it was around a lot of that was around 6... 7000 feet... figured the altitude. Chutes had come in but I'd jumped out of there too... didn't think too much of it. We took off for the Black Range... it's in this story here. And, jumped around Diamond Peak, that was 11,500. And I figure I'd get the good wrap... it was in the morning... and it just as nice, didn't make no difference. But, I did think about it, I said, "Man, they talk about the altitude, this is up here." And really it didn't amount to anything, coming in here... everybody thought it would.

KR When'd you jump at Yellowstone?

HO Oh, I don't know what years... we just worked. I didn't jump out of there that... we used to go over with the Ford and go down.... Went down with the Ford one time and then you'd suit up once you get close to it... we was up in the aircraft, and jump down there... no, I think was probably on... close to the Snake River that we were headed in. Remember that one time with the Doug and, ah... I don't know where we jumped, but we didn't amount to too... of on the plateau there so.

KR Well then that must have been in the 40's because they had their own jumper unit.

HO Yeah, not till later, not till later. I don't... they had their smokejumper unit but we were before they had it. Before they had one established as a permanent unit. And, ah... what was the name of the guy that got that first unit? I don't know what year they got it but I don't think they got that...

KR Gorsuch?

HO Nope, no, he wasn't the first guy that went down there. You know, in charge of it. I meant when it went finally to the Park and, you know, they end up decentralizing it, yeah. And it could have been. I forget my years... I should have wrote them down... but I don't remember, yeah.

KR Big fires down there that you had to jump on?

HO No they weren't.

KR Little ones.

HO About ten guy... too much going in the park... it's too high.

KR Oh.

HO Yeah, they didn't too much. They'd get a fire every once in awhile but I'd never seen any great big ones down there... but they... not when I was around... they can't... they can burn anywhere if you get a good breeze in front of them.

KR So do you jump with, ah... you jumped with a lot of Service people. Yes?

HO Yeah, oh, yeah, there... there were some guys... most, you know, most young ones that come back right after the war, you know, or had been in the service at one time or the other here. I'd say the majority of them out there... conscientious objectors, were not, you know. I think they started about '46, they started hiring, you know, regular people that I knew jumped '46 and 7.

KR Were you... did you jump with any CO's... were they...?

HO No, no, they weren't there, ah, they were just... I think they jumped to '45.

KR How'd they do?

HO They... Earl says they were pretty good at a fire... they done a pretty good job. But I was never around them.

KR Yeah, that was before your time.

HO Um huh, yeah, yeah, that [laughs] yeah, it was.

KR Not too much before.

HO No.

KR You were in the service then, right?

HO Well, I was in the service, yeah, I was in the service three years, I got out January '46 and I went to Moose Creek. I figured

that was the place for me [laughs]. We used to go back there in March and come out in November in Moose Creek.

KR Yeah.

HO Figured that was the way to save money. I didn't mind it. Though one time I did hike out of Moose Creek... had a girl friend over there....

[END OF SIDE A]

[SIDE B]

HO That was 28 miles in there, ain't changed yet, the signs still there... 28 miles. I used to come out in seven hours flat. I was... I could move on my feet... I'm... no I'd be a good hiker. Make her... I'd say, "You be there at 3; I'll be there at 3:00, OK." [laughs] And I could do it. No, I could stay up most of the night and be back Moose Creek oh about 7:00, 8 in the evening. I'd jog a lot, I could... [interruption] where somebody went up and took care of the fire... [interruption]

KR Well tell me about New Mex.

HO Well actually, you know...

KR That was '55?

HO Yeah, this was in '55 and the best way to do it is to read this book. [laughs] He... what he done here is jumps on average... this is just a fire that he was involved with, you know. And, ah, ah, I'll read you...

KR Well what were you involved with down there?

HO I was the overhead, and, ah, I had the teaching call and Big Andy, here to spot and stuff. And anyhow it went along in this fire. You ought to read this he cusses me out. But anyhow, I went along in this fire and I didn't have anything old... ah, that had two spotters of course in the Doug and....

KR And a dog?

HO In a DC-3, a Doug, they were called a Doug, yeah. But anyhow Paul Denison and Andy they were spotting,, and I went along with my movie camera... took out the... the exit door so I could take some pictures, you know and stuff. And I wanted to check their spotting anyway. I'd take my jump gear, and I... I figured it was just a little fire. Turned out to be a big fire moving along real fast see. And, ah, and you know it's really squirrely when they... I looked at it and I figured some body's going to have to jump down there see. No... all the all 3 overhead was in the aircraft with no jump gear, see. 'Cause spotters don't take jump gear, just, ah.... So I took Fred Cable's jump gear... I think he... he's ju... he was the FC over

there at [inaudible]. And I think he's still up there. Not further on than... and, ah, I said, "Well I'll try jumping and see how it goes." So I jumped out and the chute... they couldn't get a chute in there... no I end up getting [inaudible] so heavy that I was higher than the airplane. Took me six minutes to get to the ground. And he backs this all up here in the book, yeah.

KR That's incredible.

HO Yeah, and, ah... yeah, well that countries really hot, you know. It was just on the south slope, and that old fire... I was close to the thermal. The fire puts out these thermal drafts, and I got into that.

KR What was going through your mind while you were going through that thermal?

HO Well I, I... I just looking make sure I wasn't going to goin the fire... didn't miss it too far. There was chute it... go like this, start coming and it'd go, and, ah... he writes about it here in the book, yeah. And there was... and they finally all jumped... they strung them out for a mile. Yeah, he got all this stuff and [laughs] he writes all that stuff... really it wasn't all that dramatic. [interruption] He... he gives me the dickens. [interruption] See [laughs]. Upon the season, you know, about September 20. No, that [inaudible] too rough and too windy... I want to get going... I could dry run [inaudible].

KR Now this is which fire?

HO Spring Mountain.

KR Spring Mountain.

HO Yeah, here's another one, but that's [inaudible]. It was just one of those sneak [inaudible]. And that was pretty fast jumping; they strung those people out [inaudible].

KR Yeah.

HO You have to know [inaudible] to appreciate this.

KR So when you're overhead you jump when you want to or...?

HO Well, yeah, I was in charge; when you're the boss, you're the boss.

KR Right, so how often did you jump?

HO Not too often down there, ah, unless you got a crew fire, you know. You want to take and... take a... just one of the things that you want to know they... Of course I'd jump when I could out of Missoula, but there you had the responsibility of others didn't jump and somebody had to take care of the cargo.

KR Right.

HO And I also got all the sheet packing, had to do all the loft work. And they weren't too neat... I had Dave Pepper and Johnnie... other rigger I had he was on fire. We didn't have lot of the extra cargo sheets and all that, had all their keep time, and fill out that stuff, I had all that to do. And so that became my first priority but it was emergency and we kicked out a jumper, in fact I jumped that Paul Denison [inaudible] put him on three fires in one day.

KR Three fires in one day?

HO Yeah, he wanted to jump on one. One was right out to the airport on what they call the Little Girl Mountain. "You let me jump." I says "you have to." "I want to have a record" he said "I never done that before." Now... now Jim Crocket... you've heard of Jim Crocket ain't you?

KR No.

HO He jumped out of... he lives up here at, ah, Nogales now and, you know, I see him a bit. And he's got... I think the record, he's made five jumps on a fire in one day out of McCall. It must have been two fires because [inaudible].

KR Now when is it that you went from just being a smokejumper to being in an overhead position?

HO Well, I don't... I think I got to be squad leader about '51, and then I got... I don't know when I got to foreman. I was... I was... when I was over at Grangeville they didn't get my foreman grade, I think I got it the following spring, ah, '53 or '54.

KR So you just kept moving up, and moving up, and moving up.

HO Yeah, it... well that's as high as you could get, the foreman's the best you could be down there. Now well... of course they've got a few extra positions. You're not just stuck when [inaudible]. We didn't have any help like they've got down there now; they've got an office, office staff, and they've even got an administrative assistant. Hon, Hon... Honorable Harry Shylock, I just... I know he was just a clerk out there. He had 192 jumpers, in those times these bases weren't decentralized, everything was [inaudible]. And now that... processed all flight tickets in 1967, we had a lot of aircraft flying in '67. And I processed those... those and Helen's [inaudible] she was the only other person to see that. We always got [inaudible] paid every two weeks... she never complained. Now you've got a battery of people doing what we done by ourselves plus the rest of the crew. And they upgraded my job since I left and cut it two different ways, only got 125 jumpers [laughs], can't believe it. [inaudible]... aircraft... [inaudible] in charge of aircraft, I had the work list, I had the kitchen supervision, and driver training, defensive driver courses, first aid instructor, I

carried it all. And... and I used to give a lot of courses for the fire department and, ah, you know, like first aid and all that so you've got [inaudible]...

KR When did you... when did you retire?

HO I retired in '74, June of '74.

KR And when was your last jump?

HO I worked in August of 1960, jumped that year in [inaudible]... I jumped up here in, ah, Haystack Mountain on South Fork [inaudible]... easy [inaudible] about 12 miles in the Haystack.

KR A good fire [inaudible].

HO Yeah, that was dandy. We just... we all... I look at it and I see well I got [inaudible]. I remember when I went on the [inaudible] fire, and, ah, you just see... got Fred Tanaski to spot. He started laughing "Herb come up and see your fire it was just over Lolo". I could see a confection column up there about 30,000 feet [inaudible]... So I thought that was my fire all right [laughs]. They dropped another sixteen [inaudible]... that was a big one. That was the same time that they had that earthquake down there at Yellowstone [inaudible]...

KR You were down at Seeley when that big fire happened down there.

HO Oh, yeah, those fires can go off. It wasn't on me, it started on Darby, and if I... no it's the truth. And that was sit on... that was just off the Y, just up on Wright Creek, and, ah, that forest fire now. And I'd seen the lightening, it was really dry, when... I got seven fires out of the same storm, and I put jumpers... called for jumpers... they told me they wouldn't do it, but I... right away. And then I put those two out... I had a fifteen man stand by crew that I dispersed, and we fought all ours by daylight. And they got up there and really didn't get nobody on that fire until that evening. It was only about a half a mile up the road.

KR That was the Sleeping Child?

HO That was the Sleeping Child burn. And so what they do... they had to slash the road and they said "well" [inaudible]... because they got jumpers on it right away... it was terrible, got six jumpers, you know [inaudible]... that's what really caused the Sleeping Child fire, and, you know, it burned back. Well the next day that wind came up and you had fire on both sides of the road [inaudible]... So I had to go to work in the near position. [inaudible] And the... had, ah, but they had... was going to have a big burn out there, what we call [inaudible] was going to burn it back and [inaudible]. They put me in charge of the burn out crew, we had [inaudible].... Of course they had the line [inaud-

ible] but I knew it wasn't going to hold, I said "we're going to strip it." And it's true it's supposed to hold [inaudible]. By the afternoon, wind come up. It was going to be all over [inaudible]. I was waiting on the regular fire, and I could hear the fire cooking, I knew she was a coming, and I was watching it pretty close. I knew you was supposed to wait until the word [inaudible]... I couldn't get the line

[DUE TO MACHINE NOISE, THE REMAINDER OF THE INTERVIEW IS BARELY AUDIBLE]