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Interviewee: Conrad Orr

Interviewer: Floyd Cowles

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Floyd Cowles: This is Floyd Cowles interviewing Connie Orr for the Smokejumper Oral History Project. It's June 14, 1984, in Missoula, Montana. Connie, can you give me a little autobiography of yourself?

Conrad Orr: Yeah, Floyd. I was born in Missoula, 1935, the old Thornton Hospital, which doesn't exist anymore. It's where Missoula City-County Library is. Of course, I haven't lived in Missoula all my life, but I've spent most of my life here. When I was 5 years old, my folks moved to Dillon, where my dad was in teaching at that time. He was the principal of the school—superintendent of the schools at Dillon, Montana. Right after the war broke out in '41, why we moved back to Missoula again. He then became involved with the Internal Revenue Service, so he spent the rest of his life here in Missoula and retired [from] the Internal Revenue Service so consequently, I have spent the rest of my life here since that time. Went to grade school up the Rattlesnake [Creek], Lincoln School, also down to Central School, seventh and eighth grade. When to Missoula County High School. Graduated from Missoula County High School in 1953. During those years, high school years, of course, a lot of things happened to me: athletic-wise I was out for all sports at that time.

I became interested in smokejumping during my junior year in high school, which was about 1952. Of course, you were not supposed to be able to get involved in jumping until you had had some experience with the Forest Service. At that time, I was only 17 years old, so that summer I did apply for a blister rust job, and I was able to manage to get a job, at that time I was just about ready to turn 18. So I did get on a crew over in Idaho, Slate Creek, Idaho in the Red Ives District, which is about 14 miles south of Wallace, Idaho. And that summer was spent digging river bushes and doing all the good things that you do on a blister rust crew.

FC: Sorry to break in, but in '52—this is about the same year as I was on a fire down in Riggins and Slate Creek is just a few miles away. Where you on a project fire [on] Riggins Ridge?

CO: Yes. There was a fire down there then, yes. We were.

FC: Where we hiked up the mountain for about 4 hours?

CO: Yes. Real steep, high mountains.

FC: All right, we were on the same fire then.

CO: Yes. Right. I remember that one.

FC: That was the one I was talking about where the guy was running downhill and the grass—

CO: Oh, grass fire was, yes.

FC: Went across a footbridge.

CO: Yup. Yeah, I remember that one.

FC: Okay. Can you remember what specifically about that I think it was Riggins Ridge, maybe it wasn't, but remember anything specifically—

CO: Well, I know it was a hot one, and it got windy at times. Lost a lot of line. We did lose line on that fire. I can't remember the size of it. We had a crew of about...In fact, most of our blister rust crew, I think, was on that fire. I don't recall a lot more about it, other than the fact that it was a hot fire at that time. It was a hot summer, too I remember.

FC: Grass, lower slopes, very steep and timber up on top—

CO: In the high country, yeah

FC: I remember taking 4 or 5 hours just to hike up to the fire.

CO: Yeah, steep, real steep country.

FC: Were you on any other fires in that—

CO: That was about the only one we were on because it was close. It was real close there. I don't know that we got on...Yes, we did. We did get on a couple smaller ones. I don't recall the names specifically, but they weren't as big as that fire. That fire burned a lot of grass, and of course, it covered a lot of country.

FC: It was a couple thousand acres.

CO: I think it was, yeah.

FC: Well then, what did you do after 1952? You were still in blister rust at that time and—

CO: Right. Okay. Then the next year, of course, I had...1953 then I graduated from high school, and I apply for the smoke jumpers out here. Of course, at that time we trained up Nine Mile and everything was flying out of old Hale Field, where Sentinel High School is today. But I was successful in application and did get accepted into the jumpers in the spring or summer of 1953. Did our training at the old Nine Mile—above the old Nine Mile ranger station. It was at

the old CCC camp, I think. I think that's where it was, up above the ranger station. We had our barracks up there. We had our mess hall facilities. We had our obstacle course. We had the...Actually, we had a little air strip right close by our facility up there, too. We could take the Trimotors and Travel Airs off of it, but that was about all. And we had a 4-week extensive training course up there. We had a lot of map reading, of course, back up behind the old Nine Mile station. We did have some control burns that we went through up there. We had a lot of good recreation.

FC: What happened on the control burns?

CO: Some of them got away from us. [laughs]

FC: No. What I mean is...Oh! Training for the jumpers.

CO: Jumper training, yeah. Control burns for jumper training, and I remember one that we did, lit up then at that time, thought my brother in-law was on that fire that was—one of the overhead at that time, Bill Demmons.

FC: I know Bill.

CO: Yeah. And we had a fire get away from us up there. We lit it up, and was supposed to suppress it, and it got away from us so we had a little more than what we bargained for. It was a good training episode. Some of the fellows that I do remember that are still...In fact, a neighbor across the way here, Ray Parker, was in my jump class in '53. I remember a fella, too, a good friend and I...he lives up at the Flathead, close to our place up there is Don Whipple who use to handle the accounting and all the paperwork for fire control. Yeah. We'd play—recreation—we'd play basketball in the evenings and Don was always down there playing with us. It was an unique place, it was a nice place up there. It was set in kind of a mountain setting, and you were in the woods all the time and you were a long ways to town, of course, about 30 miles. About the only recreation that we had was down at the Nine Mile House if you wanted to go down and have dinner or have a beer, or whatever.

FC: Well, that was over 30 years ago, 31 years, what was different in jumper training then, than anything you might be aware of now?

CO: Okay. Oh, I think there are a lot of things, Floyd, that I've been aware of. I haven't been back in the last 10 or 15 years out there to see what changes have taken place. But, in those days we were just talking earlier that...you mentioned, of course, the weight of the jumpers was supposed to be at 185 pounds. Probably one of the main reasons, I'm sure, the weight was such a limitation was the fact that we had 28-foot chutes. And you had a man that weighed much over that, his rate of decent would be much more rapid than a person that would be much more lighter. I weighed, probably, 155, 165 soaking wet all the time that I was jumping, so it was fine for me. But you take a man that was 185, 200 pounds, 215 pounds, he was gonna hit

the ground pretty hard. But when I started in '53, the tails and slots were just coming in. In other words, the—

FC: What do you mean, tails and slots?

CO: Well, our chutes had what we called little skirts that trailed behind the chute. It was always behind the jumper, which gave us...It spilled air out the back end of it, which gave us a little increase in our forward speed. It would allow us to...if we pulled down on our risers, it would allow us to increase the forward speed several miles an hour. Then slots. I think there were 7-foot slots—two slots were put in the chutes. I can't remember whether they were at 3 o'clock or 4 o'clock or whatever, but there were two slots on either side which were controlled by a guideline and when our guidelines, of course, were pulled...if we pulled the right guideline, it closed that slot and allowed us to turn to the right. When we let up on that, then we were in a straight trajectory, we were moving in a straight line. When we pulled on our left guideline, the slot closed, we were able to turn to the left. And we could actually do a complete 360 then at that time with our slots and tails in about, I think 3 and a half seconds.

FC: Were you training jumps around Nine Mile—or I'll call it remounts, they're almost one in the same—or did you have different areas for your training jumps?

CO: Well, Floyd, the first three jumps I remember that we had were...My first three jumps were in that meadow at the old Nine Mile Ranger Station in the hay field, on that slope. I can remember my first jump very well because I was jumping out of the Travel Air, there was four or five of us in the Travel Air and the positions, of course: we always had our foot in the door and hands on the side to the door, and head out, waiting for the squad leader to slap us on the shoulder to jump out. Well, I'll never forget: at the critique at the end of the day, Brauer was asking me, "Who was the fella that leaped out there about 20 feet—out of the door of the airplane?" And I think that was me. I just gave all I had and sprang out of the door, and it was an interesting feeling. The next thing I knew when I was about ready to hit the ground, I thought I had a lot more time than I did, the next thing I knew I was laying on my back.

FC: You didn't land properly or—

CO: Well, I thought I was going to land properly, but evidently, I didn't. [laughs] But after that, I was aware of the speed. It takes a while to adjust to the amount of speed that you're coming down. And so, consequently, the next jump I was ready and from that point on I had no problems at all. The other jumps, though Floyd, were very close to the area. We had jumped up Hooley Creek, or Hoole (?) Creek, I guess it's called. We jumped up Lower Sherman Gulch, Upper Sherman Gulch. We jumped, let's see...I can't remember some of the other drainages, but most of them were right around the Nine Mile area, so they were all fairly close.

FC: Five. Five training jumps?

CO: Seven. We had seven. Our fifth jump was our timber jump. And what they did they...at that time they gave us the old, camouflaged colored chutes—the old army chutes with no slots, no tails. Some of the old white chutes that they used originally, and they had a lot of...of course, you'd oscillate a lot because you had no air going out through the slots and you had no tails to kind of control forward speed. You'd oscillate quite a bit. But we weren't concerned about, so much about tearing them up when we were hitting the timber with those old chutes. I do remember that timber jump. It was a little windy that day and it was hard to control your oscillation with your chutes.

FC: That was your toughest training jump, then, the first timber jump?

CO: I would say that it probably was. It wouldn't have been had it not been a little windy, but it was a little hairy because it was difficult to control chute oscillation. I'd a been happier if I'd hit...landed in a tree, but I didn't. I landed on the ground. [laughs] So actually your tree landings were very soft if you weren't blown into the trunk of the tree, or you didn't hit a...catch a limb that was fairly rotten—about ready to break down.

FC: You didn't get injured in any of the jumps?

CO: Never ever got hurt a bit. Never got injured one way at all. I always felt that I had some close calls at times, but I always came out—no problems, no injuries. I always felt I was in real good shape. Kept myself in real good shape and most of those fellows did. There weren't a lot of injuries, but every once and a while you had a few accidents that were bound to happen.

FC: What accidents were you acquainted—again, we're talking about your first year of jumping—any particular accidents at that time?

CO: Well, I can remember a few with the newer fellows jumping. They'd come down and wouldn't do a complete Allan roll was what we called it. The Allan roll was the roll that we would complete—when we hit the ground, we'd hit with both feet on the ground and make a twist and kind of do a complete flip over. That took all the shock off your legs and it kind of evened out the concussion when you hit the ground—on your whole body. But I remember seeing a few of them coming in where they'd hit the...go right down to their knees and take quite a jar and hurt their backs, some hurt knees, had a few broken legs. That always occurred.

FC: Well, with only 28-foot diameter, you'd get to dropping pretty fast on that, and...You mentioned Fred Brauer. Can you make some comments about Fred?

CO: Oh yeah, Fred. Well, I think Fred was probably as much instrumental in getting me into the jumpers as anybody I can recall at this time. I always liked Fred. Fred, to me, was a great leader. He didn't play any favors. He was always sincere about what he said and [when] he said he'd do something, he'd get the job done or get it done. So, I always respected Fred. In fact, to this day we're pretty good friends, I see him quite often and we enjoy talking about some of the old

times as well. But in those days, of course, Fred was head of the jumpers, and I can't remember how long he was able to stay, but they had a deadline on age at that time. That when you reached 40, you had to go into some other line of work. I think though, I think Fred was there just about all my years of jumping, from '53 to '58. And I think after he turned 40, he had to go into another field in the Forest Service. But Fred, I always respected Fred for his leadership. And he got the job done that needed to be done.

FC: Were there some of the other overhead that stick pretty much in your mind, or the other jumpers?

CO: Oh yes. I can...Now that you mention it Floyd, I can think of quite a few of them. Al Hammond was another fella that I respected and enjoyed. He was a good foreman. Al Cramer, who was the foreman in the loft, and I was a rigger for about 4, 5 years of the years I jumped. Became a squad leader, I think, in '55 and I was, of course, in the loft from that time on. Al was quite a fella. Jack Nash is another fella I remember I had a lot of respect for Jack. Jack was probably the world's authority on parachute rigging, on any type of parachute. He could just about pack any type of parachute that was made. There...let's see, there were several other fellows. I remember Fred Bronowski was a foreman at that time. And Fred, I think, at a later date went down and was head of the group at Redding, California. Fred was quite a good fella. Paul Dennison was another foreman in 1953.

FC: Herb Oertli?

CO: Herb was there, yeah. Herb was a good fella. Herb was quite a fella, too. Been in quite a few fires with Herb. Let me see, who else did we have? Hal Samsel, of course, was there and he was in the loft for quite a number of years and ended up being foreman. Just retired a couple of years ago. He has a place up at Flathead real close to ours, about two doors down, so I see Hal quite often.

FC: How about fire jumps in '53, then?

CO: 1953 was a real hot year. We had fire jumps clear into November, believe it or not. We had our first fire jump the first weekend our training ended. I can't tell you for sure where they all were, I can remember a few of them. But the fire season started about almost the weekend the training stopped. We had fires...the fact is, the fire season was so hot that year, '53, that I don't recall that we got anybody out on projects that summer. I think all of our jumpers were sent to...either to...some to Washington, some to California, some to Oregon, various places. Of course, we were jumping in Idaho, and even Wyoming, I recall.

FC: I think, '53, I may be off a year or 2, but Edith Peak over here at Nine Mile, I was on that for a couple weeks.

CO: Yeah. I think that was '53, Floyd.

FC: Were you in that one?

CO: No. Wasn't on the Edith Peak Fire. No. I didn't jump the Edith Peak Fire.

FC: Were you mostly on jump fires, or did you get involved in project fires in '53.

CO: No, all jump fires.

FC: All jump.

CO: All jump fires.

CO: Yeah. I...another one I...now that you mention Tango Fire in the Flathead about August. It got started close to the Tango cabin—head end of the mouth of Tango Creek. And that fire burned right on into September and almost into wintertime. We were...a couple of us stayed on to help mop that up. And then they were gonna build a new cabin up at Finnie Creek, so Art Whitney, who was at that time the alternate ranger at Big Fork, came up and wanted somebody to volunteer to help him build that Finnie Creek cabin. So I volunteered and we built that Finnie Creek cabin in 1953, just up from the Tango Fire. But we had a lot of other fires at that time. I remember when I finally got back and I was going to the University of Montana here, I started in the Fall of '53. I remember Fred Brauer calling me in October and even into November, wanting to know if I wanted to jump fire. They had a few fires that they couldn't get enough guys to get out on. Of course, at that time I was back in school, and it was hard to get away so, I wasn't able to do it. But 1953 I think I ended up with 17 jumps in '53.

FC: I'm not sure and again on Edith a peak, but in '52 or '53 I spent 5 or 6 weeks on the Pack River Fire in Kaniksu and Sundance over ran that in '67. But it was a real dry fall—one of those years—and slash burns were getting away all the time and everybody was...and I'm sure that, as you were saying, calling back jumpers to help out. You remember anything else in there?

CO: I didn't get on that fire; I recall I didn't jump that one. I do remember the fire, though. There were so many fires around at that time that, you know, you just didn't know where you were going to end up. We had some big project fires down in the Salmon River country. It seemed like every time we got a fire call down in the Salmon, or the Payette, or the...anywhere south, in that area it was a project fire. A project fire we called anything, a 16-man load, a Doug load, whatever. But we knew that when you had a call down there it was gonna be a big one.

FC: You had a couple of Doug loads on some fires, then?

CO: Oh yeah. We had a lot. I don't know, though, that we jumped any Dougs in '53. I don't recall the sequence of years that Johnson got the DC-3's jumping. We may have had them then, but I think it was in '54 and '55. The first one he had was a DC-2 a Mexican airline DC-2. I remember

that we jumped out of. And I think that was in '55. By '55, of course, we were jumping a lot of Dougs and Twin Beeches and down in New Mex., the Lodestar, later years, of course, the Twin Otter. But by '55, we were jumping a lot of the DC-3's and most of the time we jumped 16 jumpers at a time. And we had one fire in 1955, I recall, the Lost Packer fire down in the Salmon River country, we dropped 105 jumpers—

FC: That just about used all of them up.

CO: Has used...about used us all us up. Yeah. It was one fire and it was a big fire. In fact, I got some slides on that one, I recall. But the Doug I think, I could be wrong, and some of the other fellows may remember, but I don't remember that we had the D...that we were jumping the DC 3 in '53. They may have started it in '54 or '55. But we did have the Twin Beech coming in in '53 and '54. And of course, the Travel Air and the Ford. Jumped the Ford a lot. Great old airplane.

FC: Yeah, it was a great ship. Anything in the '53 season that you remember beyond what you've discussed? How man fires, for instance, did you get on?

CO: Well, I jumped ten fires. I had seven training jumps and ten fire jumps in '53. I do remember one specific fire in in September, late September, and that was when a lot of the jumpers were starting to head back to school. In fact, I think it was mid-September and we had a fire down in the MacGruder District. I think MacGruder was in the Bitterroot Forest at that time. I don't know whether is was in the Nez Perce, I think it was in the Bitterroot.

FC: This September or October?

CO: September. Mid-September. And it was a pretty good-sized fire, but there was only 13 of us jumpers left, at least at the base. And this is at Hale Field, by the way, because '53 was the last year we were there. We packed a lot of our chutes, of course, out at the Fort, Fort Missoula. We used Fort Missoula and we had one loft building there at Hale Field. But anyway, we jumped the fire, 13 of us and it was, of course, we were pretty out-manned at the...on that fire. So we just hit the hot spots, try to get the upper ends of it and try to cool it down. Which we finally did.

And about 2 or 3 days later they were hiking about 200 ground crew in...into the fire. And [laughs] I'll never forget seeing those fellows come in. They must have picked them up out of the bars in Darby and Missoula and every place they could find them, because some of them were really a motley looking bunch. Well anyway, they got them all in there and they started mopping them up, but they didn't have a cook. They did not have a cook for that fire crew. And here comes a Trimotor dropping all this kitchen, and all these rations, and all this sort of thing. And so I don't know who the fire boss was at that time, but he said, he asked any of us jumpers, "Any of you guys cook?"

And I said, "I've cooked a little bit, but I haven't cooked for a group like this."

He said, "You're cooking." [laughs] Just like that, "You're cooking."

FC: How many people?

CO: Two hundred.

FC: Two hundred.

CO: Yeah, and plus the jumpers. So, I'll tell you, I had a real experience doing that. I recruited another fella that was jumping with me at that time, a kid from Oklahoma, and I can't think of his name now. And so he helped me. We'd get up at 5:00 in the morning and actually for breakfast, we had a lot of eggs. We'd scramble a lot of eggs. We made egg this, egg that, made toast, did fry a little bacon. But we set out a lot of things for them to make lunches, they had to make their own lunch. But I remember toward the end, when we're getting short of rations, about the only thing, we had a lot of canned tomatoes, a little bit of bread. I was making bread stew. [laughs] But we got by all right.

FC: That's way before the years of frozen meals, and I guess they freeze those out here now.

CO: Yeah. We didn't have any frozen meals.

FC: C-rations?

CO: We had a lot of C-rations. In fact, I jumped fires where they still had a few old K-rations that we got. But most of them were all C-rations. Yeah.

FC: Any other particular memories in '53? How about recreation besides Nine Mile House?

CO: Well, our— [laughs]

FC: Horseshoes and—

CO: Yeah, we played a lot of horseshoes, I'll tell you that. Al Cramer and Jack Nash and myself and...Al Cramer used to get together and play lots and lots of horseshoes at noontime and breaks after work and at, you know, during the lunch hours. You know, we had a lot of time.

FC: Volleyball and cards and—

CO: Played a little volleyball. Played a lot of cards. Played a little 4-5-6 after hours. [laughs]

FC: The good old days.

CO: The good old days. Yeah, you bet.

FC: By this time, you were going to the University of Montana, and what was your major at that time?

CO: I was majoring in pre-medical sciences at that time, and I still had my mind set on going to veterinary school. And basically, that's what my occupation is today is veterinary medicine, so I'd pretty well had my mind set on going on to veterinary school.

FC: How did you happen to transfer to Washington State in Pullman?

CO: Well, the University here had only pre-medical school and they, of course Montana does not have a veterinary college. And so I applied at Washington State and got accepted there in 1955. So I took my pre-med work here and then completed the rest of my veterinary training at Washington State. Graduated there in 1959.

FC: How about the next fire season, 1954?

CO: '54 was...I recall '54 because it was a real...It was a dry year, but no fires. I think I had two fire jumps that year. It was just no lightning at all that year. It was a typical year, where every time you see a big cumulous cloud come over you think, oh, there's gonna be a little lightning in that one, and there's gonna be a hot one. Never did develop. It was a year that everybody got on project. Four of us went on project; they sent us on project about the first of July in the Big Prairie.

FC: What types of work did you do on project in the Bob Marshall?

CO: Well, we...At that time they were maintaining two lookouts in—Jumbo Lookout and Mud Lake Lookout. And we maintained trail and phone lines to those lookouts. We also built a lot of jack fence in there for the mule strings and pack strings. But most of it was telephone line maintenance, maintaining the buildings there at Big Prairie, trail crew, trail work. And we did get on a fire, a lightning fire one night. Frank Fowler and I got on—went down. It was just a small one. The Travel Air came in and picked us up and flew down use down to Blackbear, and then we hiked about 6 miles from Blackbear up to the fire and spent a night on that, and came back down. But it was an enjoyable time.

When we finished our project work at Big Prairie, they flew us over to Condon Ranger Station and we did some...Let's see, our work there was mainly trails. We did a little road repair, signs, we did a lot of sign work. I'll never forget it. An older ranger there by the name of "Scoop" Scoval, who [laughs] who used to like to dynamite stumps. I went out to help him a lot of times, and I really was a little nervous with him because he would wire that thing up and then walk back to the plunger. [laughs] I always though he ought to take the wire to the dynamite first and then walk back and wire it to the plunger. But anyway, we had some good times on those

projects. That was a time—in '54 was the year that they built the Swan Lake...the Swan road from Seeley to Kalispell. That was the year that they were gravelling that and getting ready to pave it.

FC: How many jumpers were stationed out there?

CO: Well, at Condon there was—

FC: Approximately.

CO: Okay. We had four of us at Big Prairie and then when we went to Condon there was a few more. We had...I think we had six or eight at Condon. We did a lot of fence work; they had a little bit more project work for us.

FC: Sounds like you enjoyed the variety of project work, which sometimes you hear jumpers often times may not like that type of work. What was the opinion of the jumpers that were stationed there?

CO: Well, we had a good time. We enjoyed it. We had nice overhead, we had good food—good chow. I think, probably, part of it that made it pleasant at Condon was that in the evenings we would go down to Holland Lake and occasionally had a little recreation down there. Few little gals you'd run into [laughs] Liquid Louies. Always something to do. It was a good time. Like I say, I don't think we got called back in for fires probably 'til late August, maybe the first part of September. I think my first fire jump was September, and we only got two...I only got two that year.

FC: Nothing about those fire jumps stick out in your mind? Just typical—

CO: Not really. Because the only thing I know is we had two and I don't even remember anything about them at that point.

FC: How about '55?

CO: Well, '55 was a pretty good year for jumpers. I don't think it was as a hot year as '53 was, but we did get a lot of jumps. I do remember a lot of young fellows. That year I became a squad leader and also I was working in the loft as a squad leader packing chutes, and repairing chutes, and doing the routine things that a riggers do. Had a lot of good friends—lot of good people. Met a lot of really good friends—new people that year, I think we increased the number of jumpers...of new jumpers that year. I'm really not sure how many total we had, but there was really some good folks.

I can remember a few jumps. One I just previously mentioned: Lost Packer Fire in the Salmon River, jumped 105. I can't remember how many Doug loads we flew in there. There was

another fire in '55 that I was squad leader on. There was four of us dropped about 25 miles from Shear Ranger Station. And we had about a 25 mile walk to Shear, but that fire was unique in that all four of us had some sort of a problem with our chutes either one had a malfunction, one fellow lit on a snag—landed in a snag, I lit on a rock and broke the backpack in half, one of the other fellows [laughs] lit in a creek. So we all lit in kind of a precarious position.

FC: Where any of them injured?

CO: Not a one of us were injured, but the—

FC: Awful close, though.

CO: —the one that...the one on the...that lit in the snag, I remember his name. He was a heavy fella, weighed about 215. His name was Jim Piggot and he was, I think from Tennessee. He was gonna go into medical school. And he was hanging in the top of this old snag and he was just hanging out, kind of swinging out, facing the ground. He wasn't hanging up and down, he was hanging kind of parallel to the ground. And he did not have a knife on his reserve. I don't know why, or how he didn't have it, or he lost it. I think it may have come out when he jumped. And he had some lineovers that were keeping him parallel to the ground. He was up about 40 feet, and he was so heavy, that that old snag was just creaking. I was just afraid that at any time that thing was gonna fall on top of him. And he was too. I says, "Don't move Jim! Just stay there!" And so I threw a knife up to him and he was able to catch it, cut the lines and let himself into a position where he could get into an upright position, And he managed to let himself down very gently without disturbing that snag. When he went back to cut the snag down later with his chute out of it, probably had about an inch solid core around the outside and all the rest inside was rotten.

FC: Rotten. Oh boy!

CO: And then one of the other fellows had a malfunction. He had a couple lineovers, and his chute wasn't open very well. And he came in pretty hard.

FC: But he wasn't seriously hurt.

CO: He wasn't hurt. Nobody was really hurt on that fire, but it was sure kind of a hairy experience. I'll never forget, when we went out on that fire, the packer came in about 4 days later. It was a pretty good-sized fire for four individuals, but we managed to control it all right. He had a couple of mules that are empty, and he said, "Well, if a couple of you want to ride back, why you know, you can take turns riding back." It was 25 miles.

I said, "Yeah, that wouldn't be bad." And he didn't have any saddles, you'd have to ride bareback. Well, we had paper sleeping bags then, so I said, "I'll start out." And I wadded a paper sleeping bag up and draped it over that mule and I rode about 5 miles and that was it. I got off; I

could barely walk I was so sore. The other guys did the same for about 5 miles and then they both jumped off, and that then was it. We walked the rest of the way.

FC: Any other fires in '55 that stick in your mind?

CO: We had a lot of fires then. Let's see, I think '55 also was the Omar Mountain Fire and East Bread Fire up out of the Seeley Lake District in '55. They were pretty good-sized fires. I can't remember the acreage in size.

FC: A couple hundred acres?

CO: Yeah. I think probably. I'll never forget one of them, I think it was East Bread Fire. We pretty much had the fire controlled...under...we had the line around it and so they called in—the ranger called in—wanted to know if we could...we were ready to go out the next day. And the foreman of the fire said, "Yeah, I think it's pretty well controlled." He said, "Just leave a couple fellows there for another day and then if nothing happens, we'll come with the helicopter and pick them up."

So Joe McDonald, who is a good friend of mine—I haven't seen for a few years, but he is the superintendent, or the principal of the Confederated Salish Tribe at Pablo now—Joe was jumping at that time. And so Joe and I decided that we'd go ahead and stay the next day and just watch the fire. The helicopter would come and pick us up the next day. Well, everything was pretty quiet until about 3:00 in the afternoon. We just had been around the fire several times, had not seen smoke or anything. Looked down, and by golly, here was a fire just billowing up, the smoke just blowing out, and it was outside the line. Joe and I went tearing down there. Boy I'll tell you, we worked out tails off for two hours.

Finally we got it all suppressed and everything. About 20 minutes later, the helicopter comes in to pick us up. So here we are between a rock and a hard place, deciding whether we should leave or go out with that helicopter. Well, we talked the pilot into staying about an hour, just sitting there for an hour, and we watched that—the rest of that fire. We had a line around it, we had it pretty much controlled, no more smokes, and we left. But I'll tell ya, we felt very uneasy about going out of there on that trip, believe me.

FC: Fred Brauer probably gave you some lectures on that type of thing.

CO: Oh, I tell ya, we didn't tell a soul. Nobody knows it, probably until now. [laughs] Yeah, that's right.

FC: Was that a G-3P copter?

CO: I think it was a...Yeah! I think it was at that time. Yeah, I think it was.

FC: Then you went back to the base and go on another one after that?

CO: Yeah, we did, Floyd. And from that point on, you know, the fires from there, we had so many different fires that it's hard to recollect specific ones. It's really confusing as to what year, too, being this long.

FC: They run together like—

CO: They run together a lot. Yeah, they really do.

FC: How about the Summer of '56? Anything specific then?

CO: I don't think that...'56, '57, '58 were all—

FC: —easy fire years.

CO: Yeah. Easy, kind of easy fire years, and I can't recall the, you know, the fires that we...the years that we jumped on certain specific fires. We had Kelly Mountain Fire down in, let's see, Kelly Mountain, I think, was down in Salmon District, down in Salmon, Idaho. Let's see, Kelly Mountain. There's so many that I just can't keep track of. I think back now on some that I remember in '53, even. George Ostrum was on...the fire George Ostrum was on with us, it was up Fish Creek. And over in the Saint...Little Joe, I think, with Larry Nelson. Larry and I jumped on a fire in the Little Joe—the four of us. I think that was '55 or '56. But it's hard to keep track of those. Boy, I really don't recall specifically '56, '57, '58—those fires.

FC: But you had a number of fire jumps on smaller jumper fires, not any project fire to speak of?

CO: Oh yeah. I remember, I think a two-man fire in the Bob Marshall that they had up—it was up Sappho Creek—and I think it was probably '56, '57. Two of us dropped on that. It was an old...it was a lightning fire burning an old snag. We were on that 2 or 3 days, and then walked down to Big Salmon Lake and then into Big Prairie. And then they came in and picked us up—picked our gear up. We did run into a grizzly on that—at that time. Coming out of there—

FC: Elaborate on that.

CO: Yeah, we were coming off a ridge and were not expecting anything, and all of a sudden, I looked right up about 25 yards ahead of us, there is a big old grizzly, standing up trying to see us and trying to smell us. And boy, here we are with our gear and our packs and everything; nothing we could do but stand there. Well, he got wind of us and down he went and away. We met the packer coming in on the trail about an hour later. I remember the packer because, when I'd worked in there at Big Prairie in '53, why he was still there. His name was Bruce Piles. He had a big Airedale with him he kept with his string. That Airedale was with him on those trails all the time. I told Bruce, I said, "We just jumped a big boar grizzle on that ridge going up

to the fire."

And he said, "Well," he said, "I got this dog," he said. "They don't get very close." And he said when they got in there, the dog picked up the scent. He said he heard that bear, and that grizzly going about three ridges over [laughs] before he got into the...into where the fire was.

FC: Do you have any other experiences with other wildlife during your jumping career?

CO: Well, when we were working phone line in the Big Prairie in '54, down at Mud Lake Lookout we were...we left Big Prairie early in the morning with horses, hauling a bunch of wire down to restring some wire. Bruce was packing us down and then he took the horses back to the Prairie. We walked back, working the line as we went. We had climbing spurs on and...I remember the fellow who was with me, Frank Fowler, he was from Maryland. And about 2:00 in the afternoon, we came to a spring—it was pretty hot—we came to a spring, and we thought we'd sit down and get a drink. We were sitting there, and we looked on the trail and there was this great big grizzly print, right in the mud, right over the top of our track that we'd come down earlier. And I had the climbing spurs on, Frank was carrying some of the wire, and I was...had been climbing trees. He put his boot in that and the claws went about 4 inches past his boot. He said, "Is that a grizzly track?!"

And I said, "Yeah, it is."

He said, "My turn to climb!" [laughs] So I gave him the climbers. We'd walked about another 15 minutes, and we ran into a big old sow with a couple cubs. And they were, fortunately, on the same side of the trail that she was, and we just backed off and she turned and saw them and jumped down and away she went. But that was our...That was the only encounter we had in there with bears.

FC: Well, that was two separate bear—

CO: Two different bears, yeah. This was a different one.

FC: How about bobcat, or cougar, or weasels or—

CO: No. Never had...I've had some, occasionally, some little rodents—I'm not sure what—chew on our gear. In sleeping bags at night, you'd get one chewing on your boots, or something like that, but I don't recall any other episodes with...we used to see a lot of elk and game in the woods when we were either coming out or going to the fire. But those were basically the only two bear problem that we had, and they were in the Bob Marshall.

FC: Did you oftentimes pack a fishing pole, and if you had a good stream nearby, after you'd put the fire out, do a little fishing?

CO: Yeah. Always had a fishing pole. One of those little collapsible or even an old...Just take a line and a little bit of bait and a hook or two. See a nice stream, stop, maybe hook onto a nice one, that was always fun. We did get a lot of fishing in the South Fork of the Flathead when we were at Big Prairie on project in there. We could get down the creek and throw a line in and about every cast you'd have a fish.

FC: That'd be pretty nice to be up there.

CO: Oh, great.

FC: Can you think about anything else that might have—

[Break in audio]

CO: Okay. Getting back to this story, Floyd, Fred Bronowski was our foreman on this fire. We walked out to a little backwoods airstrip. Wasn't much of an airstrip it was, I think it was high over the...I think it was the Payette River, I'm really not sure, but one of those rivers back there. And the airstrip—when you took off the runway there was nothing but a big wall in front of you across the river from the airfield. So, in other words, when we take off in the Trimotor; the Trimotor came in to pick us up. The runway slanted downhill so you'd get a pretty good momentum. You'd take off on the downhill—on a downhill towards the river, heading into this big wall. What would happen—the runway really wasn't long enough to take off, you'd drop off into the river area and then turn upriver and then start climbing to get out of there.

FC: It got a little hairy?

CO: That was a little hairy. But I'll never forget that, I said, "I ain't gonna climb into one of those planes where were gonna take off like that!" The eerie part about the whole thing was, there was about three or four carcasses of small airplanes laying all over the side of this runway. But that, probably was the scariest episode that I've had in a plane, as far as taking off.

FC: Where was this?

CO: It was in the Payette National Forest, but I don't recall just which river or which field we were taking off of. It wasn't a big one, it was a little one.

FC: There was a carcass of an airplane at Moose Creek in the Nez Perce one time I was there.

CO: Yeah. I've taken in and out of Moose Creek several times. We had a jumper accident down there when I was jumping. I wasn't on the plane, fortunately. I think the Trimotor—one of the Trimotors came in, didn't have enough runway, and went up and hit a bunch of cans—

FC: Is that one where Supervisor Blackerby—

CO: Yes, I think that was.

FC: —was killed?

CO: Yeah, I think so. Yeah. At the end of the runway, they hit some of these—I think they were gasoline cans.

FC: Fifty-gallon gas cans.

CO: Fifty-gallon drums. Yeah.

FC: Where you there at the time?

CO: I wasn't at Moose Creek at the time, no. I wasn't at Moose Creek then. I've come out at Moose Creek several times. I remember a fire, now that you mention it, you know, we go on and talk about these things it brings to mind different fires. We came out at Moose Creek from a fire called Battle Ridge. We walked about 18 miles. Paul Dennison was the foreman on the fire at that time. I think there was eight of us, and we walked all one night out of that—after the fire was controlled, of course—and we walked all one night to get down to a trail. Well, it was just a miserable night because it started to rain, our gear got wet. We ended up in a creek bottom, you know, couldn't see, the guys were just having a miserable time. And we ended up coming out at Moose Creek that time.

Another fire was in the Fenn Ranger District, that I recall. It was in the Nez Perce at that time and Moose Creek was in the Bitterroot at that time. And consequently, they wanted us to come out in the same district that the fire was in. In other words, if the fire was on the Nez Perce, we had to come out in the Nez Perce Forest, like wherever the ranger's station was. But it was 33 miles to Fenn, but only 28 miles to Moose Creek. But they wanted us to come out at Fenn.

FC: I hope the Forest Service has changed that by now.

CO: Well, I suspect they have. But anyway, we walked out 33 and a half miles in 10 and a half hours. Hugh Fowler and I, and I don't remember the other two guys on that fire.

FC: Did you packs...pro-packs, jump gear?

CO: We had packs, but we didn't have to pack our jump gear out because 15 miles of that was cross country and the packer was coming in with chain saws and mules and so on. We were on that fire for 7 days, we had to have them drop us a pumper, because there were some great big trees that burned down into the duff—into the roots—and we just couldn't get at it. But we did have a creek close by, so they dropped us a pump and we just pumped water into those big trees until we finally felt we had her out—7 days on it.

FC: Do you remember what sort of a pump it was?

CO: Oh boy, Floyd. I sure don't.

FC: Just a portable pump.

CO: Yeah, it was a portable pump. We had to pump it up the hill quite a ways—the water up the hill quite a little ways—but I recall don't recall what type it was at that time.

FC: You had to use these portable pumps much on other fires? On jumper fires, I mean.

CO: Yeah. Two other fires I remember that we had used them where we really needed to get them going, a lot of duff, a lot of roots, a lot of deep stuff that you couldn't get down and dig out and we had water available.

FC: Any incidents with pumps that...any problems?

CO: Well, [laughs] I remember one of them, they...we couldn't get one of them running. They dropped us another one; got it going. But one of them I know, for some reason, we couldn't get it going. They did drop us another one, and that worked all right. I don't know what the problem was.

FC: How about chainsaws? Did you use those?

CO: Oh, yeah. We used those a lot. The first year, 1953, my 1st year fire jumping, they dropped us McCullochs, big old McCullochs. They were in those great big old wooden boxes. And occasionally they'd come down, I can't recall if the helicopters were coming in at that time or not. But they'd drop them, you know, with cargo chutes, and occasionally get some boxes broken up. And some of the saws were of course, they were big, heavy saws in those days. Some of them wouldn't work, or they got bent up a little bit, but they did do the job. There's no question about that.

FC: Better than the old crosscut.

CO: Oh, God! We used to have crosscuts in every one of our two-man packs and I can remember many, many times having to use the old cross-cut without having the chainsaw. When chainsaws came in, they were real nice to have.

FC: Now Connie, you mentioned you were at the dedication of the Aerial Fire Depot in 1954. Could you expand on that—the type of ceremony and President Eisenhower and so on?

CO: Yes. What I remember about that, it was kind of an exciting thing for all of us because we

had a new jumper base, very nicely done, we had all the facilities that we could ever ask for, we had our own loft, we had our own communication center, we had our barracks, we had our runways, we had our airplanes there, we just about had everything we could ask for. The ceremony that took place was quite an elaborate thing. As I recall, there was in excess of 10,000 people that showed up for Eisenhower's dedication. And we did have...several of us did jump for that dedication. I remember it was a very, very windy day. Normally if we had found this much wind on a fire, we would not have jumped. But since it was the dedication, and there was 10,000 people looking on, and Eisenhower and everybody there, there was no way that we weren't gonna jump. But needless to say, when we did, we were scattered for miles. We didn't end up in one particular spot. I can remember most of us just floated clear on past the Fire Depot landing out in the fields, quite a long ways away from where we were supposed to have landed. But it was a nice, a nice ceremony, nice program. But, there was a traffic jam for 24 hours going to and coming from the airport at that time. But we did have a good time, it was a nice...it was a nice occasion.

FC: Do you remember anything that the President may have said?

CO: Oh golly. I really don't, Floyd, at that time. Eisenhower was, you know, a very gracious person. He always commended individuals for doing the work that they did, and he did commend us for the job that we were doing—that sort of thing. I do recall that. But as far as anything else is concerned I certainly don't remember.

FC: Do you remember the jumpers that you jumped on that display?

CO: Oh, golly. I really don't. And I'm really not sure how many of us were there at that point in time.

FC: How were they selected?

CO: I think, possibly, I think Brauer probably selected them. I think Fred was the one that probably picked out the fellows that would be jumping.

FC: They weren't on the top of the jump list?

CO: I don't think so. I suspect that they were just...may have been fellows that were just close to the loft or working in there at the loft at the time. But I'm really not certain how they were selected.

FC: Was the morale improved when that was dedicated, compared to previous years?

CO: Well, yes and no. The nice thing about the previous year, about Nine Mile, is that you didn't have a lot of the overhead looking down your neck. The other thing, when you moved to town, why you had all kinds of honchos peeking over your shoulder. And I think that was...a lot of

folks a little uneasy about that. But it didn't bother me any, it was fine, it was nice. It was a great facility and I enjoyed every bit of it.

FC: Where there any particular project-type jobs around the Fire Depot that you were assigned?

CO: Well, there were times when we were using borate, when these TBMs were dropping borate, they would load there, right across from the Fire Depot. We had to load those TBMs—we'd mix the borate there—that's a project that some of us were involved with. Of course, once I started rigging and, packing chutes, and repairing chutes, why I spent most of my time in the loft and didn't get out on outside projects so much. But basically, those were the only things that I was familiar with at that time.

FC: You've mentioned how great it was to move into new Aerial Fire Depot. What were some of the problems that you experienced at Hale Field and Nine Mile?

CO: Well, the big problems at the old field, Floyd, at Hale Field specifically, was the fact that we didn't have everything consolidated there. We had part of our gear at one of the buildings at old Hale Field, but most of our chutes and so on were out at Fort Missoula. They requisitioned some buildings out there where we hung our chutes to clean up after a fire, to repair, and what have you. You just didn't have enough facility at one spot to take care of all the...everything that needed to be done.

FC: Weren't able to make a 10- or 15-minute get-a-way from fire call.

CO: Oh, no, no. Not at all. In fact, we had our barracks out at the Fort, too. We had to drive clear from Fort Missoula out to Hale Field when we had a fire call. And so we could not consolidate everything at one spot. And then, of course, our training up at Nine Mile was, you know, 25, 26, 28 miles out of town. It wasn't that it was an inconvenience, it was a nice place to have it, but, of course, we had to drive to town to get anything completed that needed to do. But when the new base was finally finished, all of these outside facets were brought together and it was consolidated as one, so it made it very, very convenient, it was very, very nice. Like I mentioned previously, we did have a few overhead breathing down our necks, more so than we saw when we were at the other places, but it was very workable and I thought it really improved the whole situation.

FC: Not only overhead probably, but a lot of regional office people too.

CO: [laughs] Yeah, that was mainly it. We'd get a few regional office come in. Rocky Stuart, at that time, I think, was the overall fire suppression officer as you may want to call him, or...I don't know what his title was at that time. Rocky was a pretty good fella, he didn't give anybody a real bad time, but once and a while he'd have a few people from Washington [D.C.] or from other regions that would come in and do some inspections. I do remember one time, though, we did have...Under the Eisenhower Administration, we had the head of the Department of

Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, came to the watch us jump. And I do remember jumping for him, just north of the Aerial Fire Depot on one of those bare hill sides. And I did get a chance to meet him, he seemed to be a very fine gentleman, but we didn't get a lot of overhead or supervisory personnel coming in, giving us a bad time. But they did come through once and a while.

FC: Who was Chief of Fire when you were jumping? Ernie DeSilvia or who...some of those?

CO: I think it was Hansen. Wait, wasn't it D. B. Hansen? I guess he was—

FC: He was regional forester.

CO: He was regional forester. Let's see, who was...I'm really not sure, Floyd, I'm really not sure who was chief at that time. I don't recall. I think there was somebody before DeSilvia. I think he was later.

FC: Rocky Stuart was probably regional air officer, and I don't know at that time maybe the jumpers were under him—probably were.

CO: I think the jumpers were...I think we were directly under...Al Hammond and Brauer would know how that chain of command was designated. But I do remember Rocky very well. He was probably one of the few that I do remember down in the regional office at that time.

FC: Did you get involved in any equipment involvement in air projects?

CO: The equipment involvement that we had was mostly dealing with jumpers. Occasionally, though, we would get involved with a lot of equipment if we had to go out and drop cargo on a large project fire. We'd drop pumpers, and chain saws, and rations, supplies of this sort. We were quite involved with. And it was a task that usually relegated to jumpers, dropping air cargo at that time.

FC: Did you have any particular experience that remains in your mind about paracargo?

CO: Well, I can remember some hairy experiences. That brings up a point I think I mentioned earlier with...I remember dropping cargo to...Bob Johnson was flying the Trimotor and Hugh Fowler and I were dropping them. We had four two-man fires in the Bob Marshall and the Swan Valley. It was like a 5 and a half hour-long flight; finding the fires; dropping the guys; dropping their cargo; and finally we were coming back, drifting right over the Swan Range and we dropped the last of the jumpers and getting ready to drop some cargo out. And just coming down in over the trees to kick out the cargo, and all three engines cut out on the Trimotor. And of course, here we are sitting on top of the trees no way we're gonna get out of there. And as I looked up front in the cockpit and see Bob Johnson cranking levers and shuffling his feet and doing this and everything. Fortunately, we had the whole Swan Valley to glide into. And what he had just done is he had run the gas tanks empty on the one side, and he was just changing

over to the other one, but he had to restart all three engines. And believe me, it was a hairy ride until he got them going.

FC: You were pretty low at the time?

CO: We were right over the treetops. But we were gliding out into the Swan Valley so he knew what he was doing, but he didn't tell either of us. [laughs] It was scary.

FC: Besides Bob Johnson, what other pilots have you flown with, Connie?

CO: Well, I tell ya, those, all those jumper pilots as we called them were just super, super pilots. I tell ya, I think I'd trusted my life with any of them, going all the way back to Slim Phillips flying the Trimotors—he was a real character as everybody will tell you. Kenny Roth was a super pilot. Red Kelly was good. And then there was Garr and Ed Thorsrud—you couldn't beat them. They were just super pilots. The...I'm trying to think of Bob Johnson's son-in-law—

FC: Jack Hughes?

CO: Jack Hughes was a super pilot. And I remember seeing him crash a helicopter in Indian Creek in the Lolo National Forest in 1953.

FC: What district was that?

CO: That was probably...Indian Creek was probably the Lolo District, if I'm not mistaken. It may not have...it may be further south than that, but...It may have been in the Lolo District, I'm not sure. But anyway, we had a couple of jumpers hurt, one had broken ribs and one broke a leg, so we built a helicopter spot for, I guess, maybe, this was '55, because we didn't have any helicopters in '53, I don't believe.

FC: Did you jump to clear a helispot?

CO: No, I jumped on the original fire with the jumpers, so—

FC: Then you cleared the helispot.

FC: Then we cleared the helispot, right. This may have been '55. Dave Owen was on that fire, he's an old jumper and he's a...Now he's the ranger at Superior or St. Regis, one of those two. But anyway, two jumpers got hurt, so we ordered the helicopter in and Jack was flying. And I remember him circling above the spot, up quite a ways, getting ready to come in. All of a sudden, black smoke comes billowing out of the back end of that helicopter and all of a sudden, boom! It just drops like a lead balloon. And just before he hits the trees, he hovers it, just a second. He gets a little...enough RPM's up, evidently, coming in. He hovers that thing and those rotor blades just hit the snags and the reproduction and he augers it in. Fortunately, he didn't

get hurt a bit. Didn't hurt the helicopter, except the blades it tore the tail rotor and hit the overhead blade, bent that all to hell. But the helicopter was salvageable. I remember Jack...I just talked to him here a month ago and he said, "Yeah," he said, "I remember that very well." He said he dismantled a lot of it and packed a lot of the helicopter out and it was salvageable.

FC: That was a G-3B—

CO: I believe it was. Yeah, I think it was.

FC: —at that time. That's all we used.

CO: So those pilots were just...every one of those pilots, you know. Of course, you trusted your life with them, but they were just excellent pilots.

FC: Any other reflections on your basic training, before you got to the Fire Depot?

CO: No, I think they did an adequate job—a real adequate job of physically training jumpers. I think initially they singled out those that were not physically capable of completing the course. They probably did that through their questionnaires. Most of the kids...most of the young fellows that we jumped with were in great physical shape.

FC: Had to be.

CO: Yeah, and they—a lot of endurance. They're very well-qualified and quite, quite capable.

FC: What impressions do you have on general training? For instance, well, let's talk about the jump training first: the tower or the obstacle course and so on.

CO: Yeah. They did a very, very good job, I think, of training jumpers. Of course, every year, it seemed like every year there was some new technicality that was developed or new harness or new... [laughs] One thing about the obstacle course, I...getting back to that, they always came up with something new that was a little more rigorous than the year before. But, overall, the technical training was very good. Somebody was always developing a new way of letting down from a tree—a rope letdown. The tower was always fun; I always enjoyed jumping from the tower. Got a simulation of how the opening shock of that parachute was going to affect you. But everything was very well done. I think the folks that set that up, that developed that, that put it together did a very good job of organizing it so that the jumpers were trained very, very adequately.

FC: What type of relationship did you have with the locals here in Missoula?

CO: Of course, I was raised here, and I'd grown up here. I knew everyone, pretty much...seems like you could go down the street and I knew everybody in town. Isn't quite the case today. But

a lot of the fellows that came in here where strangers and I think the young...the high school kids, the young college kids that were from Missoula resented some of the jumpers, whether it be from their [laughs] macho image so to speak; or whether it be from them going to Bonner Park on a Saturday night and stealing their girlfriends; or however that started, but I do know there was a few little rows with some of the jumpers that came to town with our local college and high school kids.

FC: I suppose a good number of the jumpers were from the University of Montana, too.

CO: A lot of them were. The fact is, a lot of jumpers were Forestry majors, many of them were, of course, like myself, who was in premed. We had a lot of kids that I do know and remember going into medicine, becoming doctors. We had every facet of life, I think, applying for the jumpers and jumping. So, we had a good cross-section of people. But we did have, on occasion, have some difficulties with the young hoodlums in town.

FC: Any particular instances about some young hoodlums?

CO: Well, I remember some of the incidents that happened, but I don't know that I need to mention that on this tape tonight.

FC: Okay. No problem there. Have you ever been involved in any other rescue jump operations for some accidents or injuries?

CO: Well, Floyd, I do recall a jump that we dropped some jumpers on in the Bob Marshall where a hunter, during hunting season, had gotten mauled by a grizzly and we had dropped some gear and jumpers in to go in and try and get him out. I'm really not sure what year that was, but—

FC: —but it was mid-'50s.

CO: Yeah, somewhere in the '50s, and I'm really not certain of who the fellows that did the jump on it. But we did get some men in there right away, as soon as we found out about it. I think they brought him out; I think he was all right too. I think he turned out that he was okay.

FC: Earlier you mentioned that you knew Wag Dodge, and could you talk a little bit about Wag?

CO: Wag was a very good friend of our family's. My Dad and Mother knew him way back in the '30's and '40's. My Dad, as a young man growing up had worked in Forest Service work, had been in fire crews, that sort of thing, and had know Wag for a number of years. He was really a very, very fine gentleman, as I knew him. He was, of course, he was a little older than I. He was a short...He wasn't very tall. He was probably 5'6", maybe, 5'5", and maybe weighed about 145 or 150 pounds. Now Wagner, he was a very fine gentleman. He did relate some stories about that Mann Gulch Fire where the jumpers lost their lives in 1949, was a real sad thing. He was the foreman on that fire. It was one of those things that...Of course, a lot of what I've heard is

from what he told my folks, but one of those thing. The fire just came up the canyon so fast, it really didn't give many of them a chance to get out of there. He was one of the fortunate ones that did survive, along with two other of the jumpers.

FC: One of them was Bob Sallee.

CO: Bob Sallee was one.

FC: I don't know the third.

CO: And I don't recall the other one. I do remember the *Life Magazine* that came out on that at that time. Had a whole series of pictures and a big section on it, on that Mann Gulch Fire. It was such a nasty fire, of course, it had caught a lot of deer. I remember seeing deer burned, lots of wildlife that just could not get away from that fire. It was just such a...But Wagner was, you know, he didn't like to talk about it too much. He was, you know, it really hit him hard and he was close to all those kids. It was just one of those things that happens and, you know, there's no blame. I'm sure there's no blame on any individual. He just felt badly that it had happened at that time. I guess the odds were that so many jumps, so many fires, something's gonna happen one of these days, and it did.

FC: Yeah, that was real tough. That really started the national fire behavior training in the Forest Service, it was one of the fire disasters that started that.

CO: I'll be darned.

FC: I don't know just when, but a couple years later, they held a 3-week fire behavior course here in Missoula and I attended one down in San Demas, California and then it's, you know, 5, 6 years later probably. And they started the Fire Generalship School. Speaking of training—while in the Forest Service did you receive any training other than first aid and the routine jumper training, managerial type training, anything?

CO: Well, we did have an extensive course in first-aid training, went through it pretty fully—the uses of drugs, such as Demerol.

FC: You ever have to use it—use Demerol?

CO: Yes, did on occasion on a few individuals that had ended up with broken legs, or arms, or in a lot of pain—backs, that sort of thing. We did use quite a little Demerol. It was a good. It was a very good product to have, a nice product to have for injuries. The other...our map training was a real interesting thing. I enjoyed that, too, because they drop you out in the middle of a district somewhere that you'd never seen before and you'd get kind of disoriented. You'd pick that map up and start sighting in to figure out where you were, and where your fire was, and which way you had to go out, and so on. And I enjoyed that, I enjoyed that map course they taught us.

FC: Compass and map.

CO: Compass and map work, right. I really think, all in all, the program that they run us through was a very high-class, adequate program. We learned a lot, and the training paid off very much for us.

FC: Well, it's very good for just plain survival. If you're out hunting, and you get injured or lost.

CO: Exactly.

FC: Could you expound a little bit on the comradeship that you talk about before?

CO: Yeah. You know, you really develop a lot of good friends and close friends, and I'm certainly hoping that we will get some of those friends back here at our reunion in July. I have a few of them that come to town and call me all the time that I've probably haven't seen for 20 years, maybe 25 years, but they'll give me a call occasionally when they come in.

FC: Can you name some of them?

CO: Ralph Cook is the one I'm thinking of right now. He works with Honeywell back in Minneapolis. I think Ralph was originally from Missoula. He was a good friend. Stan Norgaard, who is still a good friend of mine, who's now a dentist here. We were good friends in college. He started jumping a couple years after I did, I finally talked him into it, and he had many good years. Cole MacPherson is another one who's a dentist today here. I talked him into jumping and he started in '55. I mention, once again, Ray Parker behind me here. Larry Nelson, who started in '55 also.

FC: He's still full time out there.

CO: He's still full time, I think, with the jumpers, right. So I developed a lot of real close friendships over the years. Al Hammond—I've known Al and he's been a very good friend all these years, as well as Fred Brauer, who was in charge of the jumpers at that time.

FC: How about Roger Savage?

CO: Roger Savage. Roger's a good friend. Roy Williams. Hal Samsel. I can go on and on and on, and it's just—these gentlemen are all just real super people and I met most all of them when I started jumping and I still communicate with them today. It's just been a real good education for me, it was a very good. Developed just an awful lot of comradeship. It holds; it's carried on right up into today.

FC: Well, my early days in the Forest Service I like to think of as, really, the best years of my life.

CO: I feel that these were some of the best years of my life.

FC: More formative.

CO: Yes. Right, very much so.

[End of Interview]