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Bryn Hammarstrom, Sr. Interview, August 4, 1989

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August 4, 1989

163-33 (No tape)

Report of my smoke jumper experience using the Questions that Roxanne Farwell asked Roy Wenger. Reported OH #133-113

RF Birth, when and where? B.H. I was born on August 6, 1917 in Brooklyn, N.Y. of Swedish parents.

RF What did you do before you went to C.P.S.? B.H. I went to college as a premed but when I graduated from Wesleyan University in 1939 I had a degree in chemistry. I went to work as a chemist (Sept. 1939 until I was drafted in April '41) for a company that made inverted asphalt emulsion used in paving roads, black top.

RF How did you become involved in the CPS program? B.H. I had asked for a C.O. status when I registered which was granted without question. I was a member of the Presbyterian Church. My mother had been a Friend since girlhood so I not only knew about it but was becoming strongly interested. I signed up as a member of the Wider Quaker Fellowship. By the winter of '40 - '41 I was back at work in Philadelphia so kept in close touch with the American Friends Service Committee. They knew that when C.P.S. started I wanted to be there and get my two year service period over with. Thus when the first camp opened on April 15, 1941 Patapsco, Maryland I was there. In Dec. '41 came Pearl Harbor so the 2 year period stretched out.

In August '41 I was one of 4 who went from Patapsco to Marion, N.C. to help start Buck Creek Camp. In the spring of '43 when I was at work helping to move the Buck Creek unit to Gatlinburg, Tenn. I learned of smoke jumping. I was so eager to be accepted that I memorized the letters on the doctors vision test panel so I could pass without wearing my glasses. The information from Missoula asked for men who did not wear glasses. I passed the test and always wore my glasses when jumping.

Thus I was one of the lucky ones to start at Seeley Lake. That summer I had become a rigger, repairing and packing parachutes. I was in the group of six that responded to a fire call in Yellowstone Park. In that jump I was using the first packed chute with my name as packer. The fire was on Madison plateau with an elevation of 8200 feet. Our rate of fall, decent was more than we ever had before so we were glad to have our chutes caught by lodge pole pine trees giving each a feather bed landing. It was more work retrieving our chutes than getting the fire under control.

The few nights we spent on Madison plateau were cold as our sleeping bags had been given to the army men when they returned to Ketchikan, Alaska after their training period. They were the first military search and rescue team and had come to Seeley Lake for their jump training. We lived and ate together. In the evenings we would play volley ball. When people from Missoula came out in the evening to see these men they could not tell us apart as the military men were on special leave and did not wear uniforms. We got along well with them as we all had been drafted. Their leader was the only one with whom we did not get along well.

I so enjoyed jumping and the beautiful country that I did not go back to my base camp but stayed with the Forest Service. Dave Flaccus and I went to work for the experimental section. In the fall we went to the test plots in Montana, Idaho, Washington and Canada counting surviving trees, measuring some and taking pictures. In the winter and into spring we stayed at the Deception Creek experiment station, 18 miles from Coeur-d'Alene, Idaho. Our job was to shovel snow from the roofs, repaint the interior of one or 2 buildings, keep weather records and every Monday take them into town which meant skiing 6 miles to the nearest plowed road. We also did 3 snow depth measurements. The records are for use in

predicting spring water run off.

Each of us spent about a month by himself as each of had compensatory time. When at a fire we kept track of the number of hours actually spent fighting the fire. At the end of the season they would add up all the hours and then remove 40 for each week and the rest they gave back to us as free time. I spent my month of compensatory time working in the Missoula White Pine Window and Sash factory. Having a Forest Service drivers license I had a key for most door locks so I spent nights in a sleeping bag in the parachute loft near the train station in Missoula. The only money spent was for meals so I got back to Derception Creek with some cash.

Training at the start of the second season was at Nine Mile and I stayed with the Missoula team or squad working in the loft, making more equipment such as jumping harnesses and the regular repair and packing of parachutes. I became a close friend of Leonhart Bartel also a rigger. He was a Mennonite from Hillsboro, Kans. When we learned that some times they did not call for jumpers because there had no packer and horse to send in and carry out our equipment, 125 pounds each. As Leonhart and I were set for the next fire call we went over our equipment very carefully and got our equipment down to 75 pounds each and we felt that we could pack our selves out. We let the fire office know that on the next fire there would be no need for a packer. Later in the week when the fire call came I was not then in the loft so Leonhart and a regular Foresrt Service man went but using the regular equipment not our special ones. The net result that they walked out, each man carrying 125 pounds, to the nearest ranger station, Moose Creek. There, there was big laugh and they were told not to come in as they feed the horses in the barn.

Early in the fall I was driving the truck down a big hill and I was going faster than I realized. The net result was I was not able to make the road turn and the truck ended off the road. The net result was that I lost my Forest Service drivers license. And I felt badly as I had thus cut myself off from the close relationship I had had with the Service.

That fall I was working on the removal of an old bridge on Route 10 east of St. Regis. I had been receiving each month the info letter from the AFSC in Philadelphia. Thus I knew that for about a year the doctor on the Friends unit in Puerto Rico needed a lab man. The net result was that I left smoke jumpers toward the end of December to go to Puerto Rico. On the way I became engaged to Helen. In July '45 her fayther paid for me to return and we were married in the Friends Meeting House in Montclair, N.J. She went with me to Puerto Rico and taught school at a school within eye sight of the clinic in which we lived. She thus became a part of our unit. As a result I did not have to tell what C.P.S. was all about and how it operated, she was there.

I wound up with the longest service period of any C. D., 4 years, 8 months and 1 day. It was actually a month longer than that as I was in charge of the Friends unit in Puerto Rico when my discharge came through. I stayed another month looking for a service group that would take over our program. I came home in late Feb. '45.

Bryn Hammars from m, s