

## ROBERT OLSON ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

August 28, 2018

This is an interview with Robert and Betty Olson, former owners of the Polebridge Mercantile from 1969 to 1974, at their place at the Montana Veterans Home. With us also is Linda Pittman, long-time North Fork resident and former neighbor. This is Lois Walker for the North Fork History Project.

Lois: I am a retired historian, so the North Fork Landowners Association asked me to take over what they call the North Fork History Project, which is collecting peoples' memories, photographs, and artifacts, building an archives of North Fork history. Not that I plan to write a history myself, but so that someone else can someday. I have a list of questions for you, then we can talk about whatever you'd like to talk about.

Bob: Okay.

Lois: Give me a little background information. Where were you born and raised, and where did you go to school?

Bob: We were born and raised in Bowbells, North Dakota, both Betty and I.

Lois: Obviously, you served in the military, since you're living at the Veterans Home. This was during World War II?

Bob: Yes, I started active duty January 5, 1943, until June 24, 1946.

Lois: Were you in the Pacific?

Bob: I was in the Pacific. We made the invasion of the Marshall Islands, and then I sat on the island of Majuro for about 21 months.

Betty: Horrible, horrible.

Bob: It was a quarter of a mile wide and four and a half miles long. But I was busy all the time.

Lois: What was your specialty?

Bob: I was a third class petty officer, and I was in fuels supply. I asked for something to do. I couldn't stand sitting around. The personnel officer put me in fuels supply to straighten everything out after the invasion. They just piled everything. Everything came in drums, and they were scattered here and there. After I got that done, I had a 30-man native working party, besides four men under me. Then the Marines set up a crane operator for us, and we had the Seabees there and the Air Force, and they built an airstrip. Majuro was the island where Task Force 58 was formed. They came in before the invasion. Of course, we were serving them, too.

Lois: What did you do after you got out of the service?

Bob: I had bought a bowling alley in Bowbells. It was just two lanes, and my brother was running it until just before I got out of the service. Then I took that over and ran it for a

year. Then when I was going to Wahpeton, North Dakota, trade school I sold the bowling alley when we went home for Christmas. I was glad to get rid of it.

Lois: How did you and Betty meet?

Bob: Well, I knew the whole family except Betty and her younger sister. There were nine kids in her family. I met her on the roller rink on a Saturday night. My two buddies had girlfriends, and they said, "Get yourself a girlfriend and go with us." I spotted Betty and asked if she'd care to go out with me. She had to sit on my lap, because it was a small car, and I kind of liked that. And that was it.

Lois: This was after you got out of the service?

Bob: That was the first part of July after I got out of the service.

Lois: What year did you get married?

Bob: In November of 1946. That's now 72 years.

Lois: That's a pretty good run.

Bob: Yes, she put up with me.

Lois: So, how did you come to Montana?

Bob: Well, they started the Korean War. I was working as a mechanic in Williston. We were moving out to Seattle to go to work for Boeing. I didn't want to do that, but Betty's sister was married to one of the superintendents at Boeing. I wanted to stay as a mechanic off line, so I tried to get a job in three different places. They said, "You're hired. All you have to do is get okay with the union." I'd go back to the union, and the union would say, "We've got a man for that. You just sit on the bench." Three of those, and I said, "No, you can keep your jobs."

I had a friend who I had worked with in Williston. He had moved there a year before. We stopped to see him on the way. The manager there wanted me to stay there and work, and I said, "No, I'm going to Seattle." They said, "If you call us by the middle of next week, we'll save the job for you." I called the day before I was supposed to be back, and I said, "I can't make it back until Friday." "Well, that's okay. The job's there."

Lois: Where was this?

Bob: That was in 1950, here in Kalispell.

Lois: So, you've been in the area quite a while.

Bob: Yes, ever since 1950.

Lois: How did you come to buy the Polebridge Mercantile? What led up to that? Were you familiar with the area ahead of time?

Bob: A little bit. We'd been up there. We had a heating business. I worked for the aluminum plant at Columbia Falls, because of a mechanic's strike. I was laid off a couple of times,

so they could get rid of one guy they wanted to get rid of. The second time they laid me off, I got into the iron workers, construction. When they laid me off, I had pretty good jobs up in Libby, but I had also started my heating business up there. With the job and doing the heating work, with installation nights and weekends, I got the heating business going real good.

Lois: This was residential or commercial?

Bob: It was residential. I got into the commercial just before I sold. We were up at Polebridge snowmobiling, and the place was for sale. Cal and Dottie Oien were losing it, and they were glad to have a sucker like me come in. It was nothing but work. Not much money, but a lot of work.

Lois: Did you have friends up there, or you just knew about the area?

Bob: Kenny Hensen, Betty's sister's husband, was working at the aluminum plant at the time. That's the reason we were up there snowmobiling, with them.

Lois: Tell me something about Cal and Dottie. I don't know anything about them. I don't have any pictures of them. I know that they only owned the store for about two years.

Bob: One year.

Lois: How did they come to buy it?

Bob: I don't know.

Lois: Are they still living, do you know?

Bob: I have no idea. They were from Choteau.

Lois: We know very little about them. Linda remembers them.

Bob: They were quite the partiers, instead of the workers.

Linda: Yes, that's right.

Bob: That was their problem.

Lois: You think they underestimated what it took to run the Merc?

Bob: They thought they had big money up there.

Lois: Ted Ross sold them a bill of goods, huh?

Bob: They weren't too honest to do business with, I'll say that. When it came to the post office, they did everything they could to get me out of there. We had the postal inspector up there three times in two months. The last time they came up, I didn't fly the flag that day because it was raining. He gave me a bad time because I didn't have the flag up. When he got all through giving me a bad time, it was lunch time and I said, "Well, we're going to have lunch. Do you want to have lunch with us?" He looked at me and said, "After the trouble I gave you, you still offer lunch?" I said, "Well, there's no place else to

eat.” He said, “You’re a lot different than I was told.” I never had a postal inspector up there after that.

Lois: Had he suspected there were improprieties when the Oiens had it?

Bob: They never did do a bit of work on the manual. Every month it changed, and you had to keep the manual up. Here they all were, laying in a pile. The manual wasn’t being filled and changed.

Lois: Ted Ross said that he was actually a federal employee. He was a GS postmaster. Did you do that, too?

Bob: Yes, I was appointed postmaster right after that last session with the postal inspector.

Lois: Yes, the postal service is very serious about its regulations.

Bob: That’s right. If you didn’t keep the manual up, that was the first thing. The Oiens must never have been checked.

Lois: Did you have to take the civil service exam?

Bob: No, I didn’t. When he saw that I had the manual all back together and up to date, which took a lot of time, I was just appointed.

Lois: Well, you were a veteran, too, which made a difference, I’m sure.

Bob: Yes.

Lois: How much land was involved when you bought the place?

Bob: When I bought it, it was 35 acres, I think it was. Oiens kept five acres.

Lois: Can I ask how much you paid for it at the time?

Bob: I took over his payments. Boy, I don’t know. I was paying Ted Ross, and I was paying Ben Rover. Ted hadn’t finished paying him off, so we paid Ben off and we paid Ted off, and we paid Oien off.

Lois: Good heavens!

Bob: It was quite a mix-up.

Lois: Rovers had the store from 1943 to 1955, and Rosses had it from 1955 to 1967. What Ted Ross’s son told me was that Annette was not well. When Ted Ross bought it from Ben, they just swapped houses. They took the Rover’s house in Kalispell, and the Rosses came up. And Annette only lived a month or so after that. So, Ben Rover came back to Ted and asked, “Can I buy some of that land back from you? He said yes, and sold him all of the land from the homestead cabin up to where the Ben Rover cabin is. He built his cabin there, so he had someplace to come. Then, of course, he remarried. But it’s surprising that Ross still owed him something after twelve years.

Bob: Well, there wasn't much money floating around then. There were very few people coming up there.

Lois: Then Ross subdivided the Polebridge townsite. It was an interesting period when you and Betty owned the store, because people were starting to buy those lots and some were starting to build.

Bob: I helped him get those lots squared away and build the roads and everything. You couldn't have found a better guy to work with than Ted.

Lois: Did he have the equipment, or did you have equipment?

Bob: He had the equipment. He had a little end loader and had a little blade that we could pull with that. All in all, we just kept going. We got the roads leveled off as good as you could.

Lois: I think there are 48 lots altogether. I think Rick and Wendy Upton were among the first to build a cabin there.

Bob: It could be, yes.



**Polebridge Store in the winter of 1971**

Lois: How well did you get to know the younger people who were building?

Bob: Not very well. We didn't have a chance to do very much but work. In order keep the place, I would go and pile brush with the big D8 CATs. I knew a gentleman from Libby, after having a business up there, and he lived right next door to me. Whenever he needed a man, if I could possibly get away, I would go to work for him. I made good money there, and that kept the store going. Otherwise, we would have lost it.

Lois: Yes, because the post office didn't make any money to speak of, did it?

Bob: I got the post office built up from the \$2,800 that Ted had. You got it by selling stamps. That's one thing that everybody did help with. They bought their stamps there, even some from Missoula, professors from the university who bought their stamps there, and some others. So, I got it built up to where we got \$10,000 a year.

Lois: Did the postal service pay you for use of the building?

Bob: No, they didn't pay anything for that.

Lois: And the box rentals, did you get that keep that money, or did that money have to go to Washington?

Bob: There was no charge for the box rentals.

Linda: I don't remember paying one.

Lois: When we had a box, it was \$2.00, I think, but that was in the mid-1980s.

Bob: When we sold it, they got impatient. They could have kept the post office, but they started going down and bugging the postal department to get the post office. All in all, they decided to change it to a contract operation. There was no postmaster anymore.

Lois: What was your vision when you bought the place? What were your plans?

Bob: I planned on building more rental cabins. I could have done it, but I didn't have time to do it. I was all set. I had a log building that was torn down in the Park that I had bought. I got it all ready to start pouring concrete for it, and a guy came up and offered me money for it, so I sold him the building. I was planning on getting rid of it about that time, anyway.

Lois: There were three rental cabins at the store, that Ben Rover had built.

Bob: Yes, I think that was it.

Lois: And then there was another cabin.

Bob: The homestead.

Lois: Yes, there was the homestead cabin, but then there was another structure between the Merc and the rental cabins.

Bob: That's the one we called the modern cabin. It had electricity and water.

Lois: But it ended up being used for wood storage, if we're talking about the same one. The modern cabin was the one behind the saloon. But there was this other structure.

Bob: That was the woodshed. It got torn down. I forget who Oien sold it to.

Lois: Yes, I heard they sold it to somebody who moved it. In some of the early pictures you can see clearly that there was a structure there.

Bob: Ted and Wally Nolan, his son-in-law, built the living quarters on the south side of the store.

Lois: Yes, they had an addition there. Then when Karen Feather bought it, she said the foundation was getting pretty bad, so they tore that off and she had Ron Wilhelm and Rick Upton put a stone foundation under the store. That was in 1982.

But you were of a mind to be a store owner and run the mercantile? You would have been in your 40s then?

Bob: I sold it when I was 47.

Lois: How did Betty feel about all this?

Bob: She was glad to get out of there.

Betty: Yes.

Bob: Very happy, in fact. She couldn't have been happier. She was the one who really caught it, because I had to run down to get the groceries once or twice a week, and beer and everything. She was stuck there with the store.



**Betty Olson working the Polebridge Store. The interior was much the same as it had always been.**

Lois: Who were some of your primary customers?

Betty: I was trying to think about that, and I can't remember.

Lois: Ruth and Hazen Lawson. Did they come in?

Betty: Yes.

Linda: Ann Hensen?

Betty: Yes.

Lois: Art and Clarine Harker?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: Was Rose Greene around?

Bob: Yes. Her husband was the postmaster in Columbia Falls.

Lois: Ladenburgs weren't there yet, were they?

Bob: Yes, they were at Home Ranch Bottoms.

Lois: Yes, Mickey Berne's old place. Did you know Finley Arnett?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: I just did an interview with Wally Donaldson, and I didn't realize that Finley Arnett was his grandfather. He was born in St. Louis and raised in Kansas City, but his parents divorced and his mother was an Arnett, so they came out here and he was essentially raised with his grandparents. That's how he came to own that land.

What was your energy source at the Merc? Did you have a generator?

Bob: Yes, I bought a generator first thing. That was a 12.5 kW generator, a Whitty generator.

Lois: Diesel?

Bob: Yes. I had the tank set up in the back, and it ran 24 hours a day.

Lois: Where did you store your diesel, to keep it from getting cold in the winter?

Bob: I used number 1 diesel.

Lois: Where was the generator?

Bob: The generator sat in the building that they tore down. It was in the back next to the garage.

Lois: Did you use the ice house at all?

Bob: I put up some ice the first winter, but that was all.

Lois: I know Ted used to. He would go back in the slough behind and cut ice.

Bob: Yes, that first winter it was pretty hard to get. It wasn't a cold enough winter to really put up much ice. But then it started.

Lois: I'm trying to think of other customers. Helen Huck Ramon?

Bob: Yes, we had a lot of her stuff in there, paintings.

Lois: You sold her paintings?

Bob: Yes.



Lois: Was she doing note cards also?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: Did you have much traffic from the Park, like Burt and Thelma Edwards or the Opalkas or Paul and Maxine Maas? George and Dorothy Walter, who were at Bowman Lake.

Bob: Yes. I know all of them.

Lois: Did you do much change to the inventory, the kinds of things that you carried.

Bob: I tried to, but it was pretty hard.

Lois: The Rosses had everything you could ever want. But I think the needs were changing, because the homesteaders were gone and you had a different clientele.

Bob: We did. We had the hippies. They stole ten times more than they ever bought. A half dozen of them would come in and scatter out. Betty couldn't watch them, and I would be gone. They seemed to know when I went for groceries, and she had to put up with that.

Lois: What kind of things would they lift? Food, or other things?

Bob: Anything they could get their hands on. Fishing supplies, they would grab everything.

Lois: This wasn't necessarily the residents? This was tourists coming through?

Bob: This was hippies that came. We didn't have any hippies up there until there was a riot back east. Right after that riot, we had three come in. Then they got on the phone, and all of a sudden they started flocking in.

Lois: Did they camp?

Bob: They camped wherever they could set themselves down.

Lois: You bought the store in 1969, right?

Bob: Right. And we sold in 1975.

Lois: Where did you live? Did you live in the homestead cabin or upstairs?

Bob: We lived in the quarters alongside the store, the addition. We just about had to be there then.

Lois: How did you use the upstairs then?

Bob: We rented it out. We had a contractor there for taking out all the fire-killed tamarack from the 1929 fire. Hoerner Waldorf from Missoula bought all that fire kill.

Lois: I hadn't heard that.



**The Olsons lived in the addition on the south side of the building and rented out the upstairs of the store.**

Bob: In fact, I went up and made \$2,700 in four weeks that I worked on that. You could only get 100 logs a day, then you had to quit. If you had one over, the contractor would give you a bad time. But I would always get a few extra. I never worked four hours a day.

Lois: How did you get your firewood for the store?

Bob: We would go up and fall everything, the big tamarack.

Lois: How far north was this?

Bob: That would be the first road that ran across from Hay Creek into Red Meadow.

Lois: I know where you mean. You know, with the fire we have going right now, they're clearing that road again. It had been closed, but they want to have it as a fire break. They started at Moose Creek and came down to Red Meadow Road, then it kind of curves and continues on to Hay Creek. They're clearing all of that now. They have big equipment.

Did you rent out the modern cabin, too?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: Did you have good success renting cabins?

Bob: Yes. That's one thing that we never had any problem with, with any of the renters. Loggers.

Lois: Do you remember how much you charged?

Bob: You can't believe it, but it was \$50 a month.

Lois: That was a pretty good deal.

Bob: I had a problem with one contractor. They rented the three cabins. He rented them, and then the one who was the foreman for him, his wife did the cooking. She was not supposed to use electricity. She was supposed to use propane. After the second month, I said, "That's it. You're out." She was always overloading my light plants. The foreman and his wife gave me nothing but problems, and finally we went up to a meeting one night and I had everything going. They poured water in my diesel plant. I couldn't get the big one going, so I was out of electricity. The next day they were gone. The guy that had the contract for their brush piling came up and wanted to keep renting, but I said, "No way. You get those guys out of here." They had called him, and he came up right away, when they were supposed to be packing. I said, "If you don't get them out of here, I'm going to file charges against you for the light plant and all that." He got them out of there real fast.

Lois: It's not like there was anyplace else to stay in those days.

Bob: No, there wasn't. They had to drive back and forth from Columbia Falls. One of the guys came up, one of the honest ones. He was the one who told me they had put the water in. Of course, I knew it. I should have pressed charges against them.

Lois: Did you have a septic system in those days?

Bob: Not really. It was all just flush it down. We did have a septic tank out there.

Lois: A rudimentary system of some sort?

Bob: I was just starting to put a good system in when I sold.

Lois: It was important, because if you were grandfathered in, then you could continue to have it. Now the regulations are so strict, that if they hadn't had that old system, they would not have been able to put in the new system they did a couple of years ago.

Bob: That's right.

Lois: Well, it is sort of in the flood plain.

Bob: That's where the county was really good with me. We got along. The county couldn't have been better. We kept the county crew, the one that worked on the bridge, then we also kept all the ones that did the maintaining of the road and plowing the snow in the winter. And Betty cooked for them. That was kind of relaxing there, because they kept everything plowed for us. One winter, the last winter we were there, we had so much snow that the county kept a trail run between the store and the cabins on the south and put the snow in between. That was 16 feet high, and that trail was filled up when it finally quit snowing. We got 60 inches of snow, on top of 56 inches, in February. How I happened to know that is because I kept the weather station. Then they put the automatic system in, just the year before we sold.

Lois: It must have been pretty quiet in the winter. How many people were there full-time?

Bob: We had a lot of snowmobilers. We made more money in the winter than we did in the summer from tourists.



**The store was a popular stopping place for snowmobilers in the winter.**

Lois: What kinds of things would they buy? Were you providing hot food of some kind?

Bob: They would mostly bring their own. Beer was the biggest seller.

Lois: Karen remarked that after she bought the store from you, “I couldn’t believe how much beer people were buying and drinking.”

Bob: I can’t remember the name of the guy I bought my beer from, but he would give me 25 cents off a case when I hauled it myself. They had a special on, and I put in I don’t know how many cases of beer. We had the door on the outside where we could open up and put the beer in the basement. It was quite a bit of beer. And Bill Atkinson would come down and help me put that last load in. He saw all that beer there and he said, “Boy, when my buddies see that, you won’t have much beer left.” I said, “Well, I’ve got two dogs, two little mini-Dachshunds, and if they hear one thing they wake me up. When I get woke up and I come out, my rifle’s in my hand, and I’m a dead shot. You just bring them down, and you’ll see how many buddies you have left.” I never was bothered.

Lois: Did you have a lot of deer and elk in the fields around there?

Bob: Yes. Down where we bought that 80 acres, we always had elk come in there.

Lois: You mean down at Hay Creek?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: You sold gasoline. Did you provide propane, too?

Bob: Yes. We didn’t sell much gas, but we sold a lot of propane. My price for gas was the same as it was downtown, but people would come in and put in five gallons and then go on downtown.

Lois: That’s crazy. Did they come up and fill the tank for you, or did you have to haul gasoline?

Bob: Gas, propane, and beer were the only three things that they would deliver.

Lois: What kind of vehicle did you have for hauling supplies?

Bob: I had a  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton pickup. I had a special cab built that I could stand up in, and it would be loaded. Because I would always top it off with beer. Any room left would be filled with beer.

Lois: Any particular brands that were more popular than others?

Bob: I just had the one brand. If they didn't want that, that's tough.

Lois: What kind was that?

Bob: I just can't remember.

Lois: I know, I'm making you scrape your memory. Did you have any employees?

Bob: Ann Hensen worked for us once in a while, but very few employees. You couldn't afford them.

Lois: What were your hours?

Bob: Twenty-four hours a day.

Lois: If someone needed something, you would open up for them?

Bob: Yes, we might get by maybe three times in a week that we wouldn't get rolled out of bed. And we always had to get up at 5:30, because we had the loggers coming up at 5:30, and they had to have their beer to take along, which was nice. Then twice a week I would take off for town. I never left there later than 6:00. I would go down and get back around 2:00, and Betty would have the place to herself in the meantime.

Lois: How was the road in those days?

Bob: It would be good when the logging association would tear it up and get it leveled off, but from then on it would start going.

Lois: Did you have any emergency situations, like where somebody got shot or somebody got hurt?

Bob: I had one guy who about midnight they were snowmobiling. They were using somebody's cabin, I can't remember whose, just south of the store. One guy ran into the fence and cut his throat. He was very lucky that his friend was a medic in the Navy. He took care of him. He came over and got me. I called the ambulance. There was a good three feet of snow at the time, and I had to try to get my rig back in there. It took quite a while to get it in there. We got him loaded up, and I met the ambulance right at Camas. But what made me mad was that I never charged him a nickel for it. He came in, and he was going to tear that fence down. Never once did he say thank you for saving his life. I said, "I don't care if you ever come back in this store." I got to the point where if I got called out and pulled them out, I had a 100-foot long three-inch nylon rope and a snatch

block. With my jeep I could tie the snatch block up on a tree, as high as I could get, then I could do more with that than with three rigs pulling.

We had the guy from Columbia Falls, who was always with North Valley Search and Rescue.

Linda: Jack Thompson?

Bob: Yes, Jack Thompson. He had the air boat.

Linda: He was across the street from us.

Bob: He came out one time at Coal Creek, and he couldn't get out. The snow was as high as the hood on the vehicle. We had four vehicles trying to pull him out, but they couldn't do anything. I got that snatch block out and hung it up on a tree. I said, "I think I can get him now. We don't need any more vehicles, but stay in front, in case I can't get enough traction." I lifted the front right up and got him out with the boat.

Lois: It was kind of a pulley system?

Bob: Yes. There were several people I pulled out who got stuck that way.

Lois: I think all of us up there find you just have to be prepared for anything, because you never know who's going to break down, who's going to get stuck, etc. You pull them out today, but they end up pulling you out next year.

Did you ever have any problems with animals? Bears or anything?

Bob: No, we never had problems with them. In fact, the three-foot fence we had around the garden, we had a deer outside our garden. Everybody had six-foot fences. There was one old doe who may have delayed it. She was always outside the garden. Betty would be in the garden working, and for some reason or other, when we got ready to leave we sold and moved down to Kalispell. The doe was out there. We had a parked trailer and everything was out beneath the lean-to and shelters, and that doe, when I would walk through the garden the gates were open and everything. She wouldn't go in the garden, but she would walk around. I'd go into the motor home or the trailer and come out, and she'd be standing there looking at me. But I was up there two weeks after we sold, and the garden was wiped out. And that's a fact.

We had another good one with a bull moose down at Hay Creek. He came in, and I was standing at the end of the walk, about 25 feet from him. He was at the salt lick down at the north side of the garage. He came walking right over, and I just stood there. He was between me and the garage, about 40 feet. He stood there looking at the garden, and he could have stepped right over into it. I pointed my finger at him and said, "If you get in that garden, you're going to get buckshot in the butt." He looked at me, walked on over to the creek and got a drink of water, turned around and came back to the salt lick. A few days later, we had guys come in a van and park just by our entrance. They came walking down because they wanted a good picture of him. He was at the salt lick. The moose saw them come down, and he came over and stood right in front of our house, between the

driveway and the house, which was only about 50 feet or so. They were standing there taking pictures of him. I opened the door and said, “Hey, I want a picture of that” and held up my finger. The moose turned around and looked at me and took right off after them. Boy, did they run! The guy just caught his cap in time, he was running so fast. I’d like to have had his story about a moose chasing him. He stopped right there at the driveway approach, turned around and looked at me and looked over at them, then walked over to the salt lick. He was the best guard dog I ever had.

Lois: Did you hunt in the fall? Did you have time to go hunting?

Bob: Yes, I would take time. I took a few parties out hunting. One fall I took three different parties out, two from Wisconsin. They were marksmen, and they wanted a moose. I took them up on Trail Creek and said, “I know where the moose is. I’ll go down and try to hurry him out. You guys stay right up here, and you’ll see him when he gets over here.” I gradually got down and got the moose going. I no more than got him going than he was out in the open. They were about 150 yards at the most from him and looking down at him. All of a sudden I started hearing shooting. I got down behind a dead log laying there, where I was protected. When they got through shooting, they shot 12 times. I counted every one of them. They never touched a hair on him. I said, “That’s enough. I’m not going to take anyone out anymore.” Then I had friends that I took out, but in all, with my elk and theirs—they had two that they wounded that I had to kill—we had five elk. I said, “No more.”

Lois: When I ask people about their memories of the Merc, everybody always talks about the cheese wheel. Did you have that?

Bob: You bet. I’m the one that got it out. Well, I think Ted had it.

Lois: What kind of cheese did you sell, and where did you buy it?

Bob: It was just a good old American cheese. The cheese cutter should still be there.

Lois: It is. It’s up on a shelf. They don’t use it, but it’s there.

Bob: Between the cheese and peanuts and beer, those were our main sellers. Betty got to the point where if they wanted a pound or a half-pound, she’d cut it, and it was so close to being a pound. She knew exactly.

Lois: Do you remember where you bought the cheese?

Bob: I got it through Kalispell Creamery. They got it from Ronan.

Linda: Did you have a cat that guarded the cheese?

Bob: No, I was allergic to cats.

Lois: I think Karen Feather did. Or her mother did.

Linda: Yes, she had a cat that protected it from the mice.

Bob: We didn’t have any mice, neither.

Lois: Did you get to know some of the newcomers like John Frederick?

Bob: Yes, I had quite a session with him when he first came up there. He wanted to buy 10 acres that I had, but we couldn't come to agreement.

Lois: Did you know Doug Chadwick?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: And the Wilhelms?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: He used to buy old Greyhound busses and turn them into motorhomes.

Bob: He was a good one. Nice work.

Lois: Did it take a long time to sell the store, once you decided to?

Bob: No, I had it for sale about two months.

Lois: And how did you come to buy your property on Hay Creek?

Bob: The family had it for sale. The daughter had that, then her brother owned 40 acres or something in the meadow just north.

Lois: I think this was Wally Donaldson's sister and brother, right?

Bob: Yes. Wally wanted that 80 acres that I bought, right on Hay Creek, but he didn't show up when it come to buying. There was another 80 acres just east of it. Anyway, Louise decided that if he couldn't show up, I could have that 80 acres, so I got it.

Lois: Was there any sort of an old homestead structure on the property?

Bob: Yes, there was a homestead cabin. Now Mary Bassingthwaighte, the last I saw, they had completely renovated it.

Lois: Jim Rogers gave me a binder from the family that originally homesteaded that place in 1918, the August and Hannah Melin family. They had taken a lot of pictures at the time, and there's a picture of that first cabin, and I think they said that Hoolie Stine built that for them.

Bob: It could be.

Lois: So, the Melins sold to Finley, and it passed down to the Donaldsons. Then when you sold, you sold directly to Mary Bassingthwaighte?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: Does she still have 80 acres?

Bob: No, she has 20 acres.





**A view of the Olson property on Hay Creek. The original Melin family Homestead cabin is at left, and the garage is at right.**

Lois: Because she sold some to Jim Rogers?

Bob: No, I don't think so. She may have, I don't know.

Lois: Did you own property on the west side of the North Fork Road?

Bob: Yes. There was 11 acres over there. My son Ron bought that from me.

Lois: You had two sons?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: What year did you start building your house?

Bob: Probably about 1980. I think it was 1981 when we moved in.

Lois: I kind of remember when you were building. When you sold the store you moved to Kalispell, then you came up and bought the property, or had you bought the property earlier?

Bob: I had the property way before that. That was part of the 80 acres.

Lois: Who built the cabin for you?

Bob: Betty and I built it. Then whenever we needed extra help, our son Ron and his wife Peggy came over. I can show you some pictures.

Lois: Is that the same cabin that Mary lives in now?

Bob: Yes. [Showing pictures] There's the Melin's homestead cabin.

Lois: Wow! That is neat.

Bob: Here's a picture of Betty in the store.

Lois: The walls look pretty much the same. Did you make any changes to the decor?

Betty: I don't remember.

Bob: Those are all the antiques. The guns were mine. I kept those. There wasn't supposed to be anything taken out of there. It was all supposed to stay in there. But first things stuff started going.

Lois: When?

Bob: Right after we sold it. The cash register was moved out.

Lois: It's all digital today, of course.

Bob: Here's the start, with the logs for the house.

Lois: Did you use logs off of the property?

Bob: Yes. There's the start of the first log. This was all my design. And there's the way we left it the first winter. And that's what it looked like when we came back, from south. That was when we stopped to see you?

Linda: Was it? You came to our house in California.

Bob: This is where we needed help. Betty and I built these rafters one day. We worked until about 10:00 that night to get them finished. The next morning, with my end loader and that pole and everything—you can see it sticking up in the tree back there. We had the cable tied to that and to the pole here. We had that snatch lock on there, and we just picked them right up and rolled them right on. We set those in two hours.

Lois: My gosh!

Bob: Peggy and Ron came over. They worked on one side, and Betty and I worked on the other.

Lois: Did Ed Neneman help you at all?

Bob: No, we had no outside help except for pouring the concrete.

Lois: That's pretty amazing.

Bob: On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, my son from Libby who was a carpenter, he and the family came up, and we put the roof on. See this little walk here? I was standing there when the moose came walking right by here. And there's the old homestead cabin.

Lois: Did you ever have any problems with flooding from the creek?

Bob: No. The Forest Service and county let me do what I wanted to do to keep it from flooding, so I had no problem there. Here's a picture of that moose. I took a picture of him.

Lois: [Looking at another photo] This is a nice shot. Was this taken from across the road, up on the hill?

Bob: Yes. We had deer in the front yard all the time. We could walk out and never had any problem with them. They weren't the least bit afraid of us.

Lois: Yes, ours are like that, too. They just sort of look up at you and go back to eating.

Bob: Ron built that little wash/bathroom on the back the first winter. He stayed in there a couple of winters. There's the deer and her fawn. We were sitting on the back porch, and she came walking by, just so proud of her fawn. She came about 25 feet from us, and then she got him down here to the creek and pushed that fawn into the deepest part. I said, "What are you doing there?" I thought I was going to have to get up and help it out. All of a sudden, the fawn got down to where it could get out. It came back up, and she did it right over again. Pushed him back in. It came up to her the last time, and she kind of waved her tail and away they went. As I say, we had no problem with the deer.

Lois: And you have a wonderful view. It's a lovely view from there.

Bob: If bear got too friendly, I would take my .22 rifle out, and I was a pretty good shot. I'd graze it right there by the tail. They would jump up and pat their butt, thinking it was a bee sting, I guess. But the third time I would fire, I wouldn't be even close to them. It would be out in front of them. They'd look up, and away they'd go. I never had a grizzly problem.

Lois: Tell me about your horses.

Bob: This is a picture of our Appaloosa. She was the mother of our little mare. I had another horse that we raised. We had four.



**The Olsons enjoyed horseback riding and snowmobiling the North Fork.**

Lois: So, you had quite a corral there.

Bob: Yes, we had a pretty good corral. That is still there. The stove is gone, but the fireplace that I built is there.

Lois: That's a good-sized garage, too.

Bob: I can't think of the name of the yellow flower. It's the same as alfalfa. A guy from Wisconsin came and spread it out.

Lois: It's sort of like yellow clover.

Bob: That was the garage, and right over here is where the salt lick was.

Lois: Joyce O'Hara told me a story the other day. She said they were driving down the road, and she saw a stallion loose, and she thought it must have gotten out of your place, so she took the horse and put it back in the corral. She went up and knocked on your door to tell you that she'd done it, and you said, "It's not my stallion!" And you had two mares in heat and weren't pleased that she put the horse in there.

Bob: That wasn't a stallion. And it happened to be . . .

Lois: She told me who it belonged to, but it wasn't somebody I knew.

Bob: There were some that belonged to John Frederick. Here they came, down the road. He had gone up to one of the lookouts, and the horses got away from him. They were on the road. I put them back there, at least the ones I'm talking about. I took the saddle off. His guns and everything were right there, and I hung it up in the garage. I put the horses in the corral, and when he came down he wasn't too friendly about taking his horses and his guns. I said, "I was just trying to keep your horses from going."

Lois: I see that you were members of the North Fork Improvement Association for many years.

Bob: Yes, but I didn't have much time to do much there.

Lois: I don't want to wear you out here, but tell me your memories of fighting the Red Bench Fire.

Bob: That was bad. When the fire started . . . I won't say anything about how the fire started.

Lois: There were loggers up there, or so I heard.

Bob: It wasn't caused by loggers. It was caused by Forest Service people. Ron and Peg were working on the log house that he was building, across the road and just south of Hay Creek Road, going up Hay Creek. Anyway, they saw a big cloud of smoke, then all of a sudden they heard a boom. The Forest Service would not let any of the local residents go up to where the fire started. Why wouldn't they let any of the local residents go up there to help fight it?

Lois: So, some sort of explosion or something?

Bob: Some kind of an explosion. That's what they heard and seen.

Lois: What was amazing was how fast it came. It just boiled down to Polebridge and into the Park.

Bob: That's right. If the Forest Service would have let the locals go in there and start in, it wouldn't have. We started fighting the fire at our place. Nobody came to help us. We had the little John Deere end loader, and Ron had his little John Deere CAT. He worked up a barricade, so it wouldn't come across onto our place. Then we went up on the hill, and we kept the fire from going down and burning him out. We worked 72 hours, and only stopped to have a sandwich and fill up with water.

Lois: Did you have some sort of a tanker or a water tender?

Bob: He had a 1,000-gallon tank on his dump truck. And I had my pick-up with a 250-gallon tank.

Lois: Someone that we interviewed—it might have been Tom Edwards—said that you took water up north.

Bob: And saved his place, yes.

Lois: Burt and Thelma lost their cabin, but they saved John's place, what we call the haunted house on the hill up there.

Bob: That's right. Ron was up on top of Tom's brother's place when that fire was coming through. And Tom's brother was listed as missing. They came back out of that.

Lois: Gary Edwards, yes.

Bob: We could not get any help from the Forest Service down there or up above on the hill. That's when Larry Wilson was talking to the Forest Service up there by that meadow. I said, "We want some help." Larry said, "Well, they saved your place out here." I said, "Like heck they did! We saved it." Anyway, we finally got somebody to go up and start working on the fire above us. We finally got a little rest.

Lois: It came down and through Polebridge in like two days.

Bob: Yes, that was quite a deal. We loaded everything into our motor home, our guns and everything. Betty took the motor home and went down and stayed at her sister's place.

Lois: Did you still have the horses at the time?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: Did you haul them out?

Bob: No, we kept them there.

Lois: And at that time Wallace Donaldson's daughter, Debbie, and her husband (who said he was Bo Tanner, but we know now it wasn't his name) were running cattle in that field, weren't they.

Bob: Ladenburg was the one who was running the cattle. It wasn't his cattle, but he had cattle for other people.

Lois: That was a sad story, that whole thing.

Bob: Yes, it was.

Lois: But I guess Debbie is doing well now. She has three daughters, and she still comes out. I'm glad to see her keeping her connection with the place.

Bob: That was something else.

Lois: When I looked at the Improvement Association roster, I see your names, and then I see Arden and Loretta Olson and Connie and Russell Olson. Are you any relation to those folks?

Bob: No.

Lois: Do you have any other pictures during the era that you were owning the store? A picture of the two of you around that time? Any picture of the two of you would be nice.

[Digging out photo albums]

Bob: There are too many albums of our trips. This one is down in New Zealand. If you want to see something, this is all handwork, the inside of that building. The Maori's did that. Linda, I imagine those pictures in there you'll know every one of them.

Linda: Yes, we enjoyed New Zealand. I think Carl went four times, and I went three times.

Bob: Here is a picture of the memorial, a canoe 60 feet long, all out of one tree.

Linda: Isn't that beautiful? They had some big trees over there.

Bob: Did you go through the museum and see the sawmill? We went through that museum, and it is something else. Here is our favorite picture, the Maori church. You couldn't see Jesus walking on the water unless you kneeled at the altar.

Lois: What year did you go to New Zealand?

Bob: I think it was 1993.

Linda: She's looking for a picture of you and Betty.

Bob: Here's one taken just before we got married. And this picture is of me in 1943.

Betty: The one on the wall is of our two boys. And one of my father and mother.

Bob: There's a picture that's her favorite. That's us when we were in Williston, North Dakota.

[Long blank pause while looking through pictures.]

Bob: Here's a picture of my great aunt in Glendale. If I had gone back to California, I would have owned that five acres. House and all. But I never went back.

Lois: I see here that the store is painted red. Are you the one that painted it red?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: It was kind of a gray or beige color before.

Bob: Yes. Here's a picture, about our 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



**Bob and Betty on the 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary**

Lois: How long have you lived here at the Veterans Home?

Bob: We moved in here the 10<sup>th</sup> of January of last year.

Lois: Did you sell your place in Kalispell?

Bob: Yes. We sold that and we were going to buy a place in Arizona, but we got sidetracked with the grandson. Then we wound up buying a manufactured home and went into Meadow Manor. Something happened to me, and we went to the hospital. I had cancer of the lung. We moved in here, but of course we already had all the plans to come here.

Lois: That's a lovely picture.

Bob: That was in March 2001.

Lois: Do you know if you ever took any pictures of the interior of the addition on the store where you lived? I don't think I've ever seen one of the inside.

Bob: No, that picture with Betty is the only one we have of the store.

Lois: I see you had some pretty nice snowcats.

Bob: Yes, we wore them out. We were out at night, and Betty was leading the pack coming back. We got right up above Ron's place, close to Hay Creek anyway, and looking up on the trail all she could see was the legs of a moose. She was maybe five feet away.

Lois: That's scary.

Bob: There's a picture of the snowmobiles we had up there at the Merc.

Lois: Oh, my gosh!

Bob: That was a group from Whitefish.

Lois: What a crowd!

Linda: When we were there at Christmas, you took Matthew and Melissa and Roy Cooper on a sleigh ride with a horse. That was neat.

Bob: Yes.

Lois: It looks like you guys had plenty of fun on those.

Bob: We were out one night. It was about eight below, and we were up on Hensen's meadow. The Northern Lights came in, and we were right in them. That's the creepiest feeling you can imagine. The electricity in the air and everything, but talk about beautiful. We had a group with us, and we'll never see anything like it again. There's a picture of our granddaughter when we were up in Alaska. She was the best baby. We never heard her cry.

Lois: This picture of Betty in the store, is this a picture that you took, or that someone like Mel Ruder took?

Bob: Somebody came in one day, and she was the only one in there. He asked if he could take a picture of her, and she said yes. A while later, here that came in the mail.

Lois: Very nice.

[Bob leaves to have a copy of photo made.]

Lois: Did you play cards with folks up there?

Betty: We played cards, but I don't know if we did it with them.

Linda: You taught Carl and I to play "Oh Heck."

Betty: Is that right? That's a little different.

Linda: Did you have the stuffed wolverine when you were there?

Bob: We had it for a little while, then Ted took it. That was Ted's.

Linda: I remember seeing it.

Bob: That was another thing with Ted. We had to go and get a new generator after that problem we had. We drove down to Kansas to get it, and Ted took care of the place for us. He was just happy as could be to be able to do that.

Lois: I think he always like it up there. Esther didn't particularly like it.



Bob: That man loved it up there. I mean, he really did. He'd rather be there than anywhere.

Linda: He drilled a well for us. Remember, he used to drill a well with a truck.

Bob: Yes. He drove it with the truck. He did for us, too.



**Ted Ross's well-drilling apparatus. Bob Olson helped Ross create roads and drill wells in the newly-platted Polebridge Townsite in the 1970s.**

Lois: What do you remember about Wally Nolan?

Bob: Wally was a hard worker, when he was awake. But he had health problems, and you've never seen anybody eat so much sugar as he did. He would dump half a cup of sugar in a cup of coffee. Wally would always come in when he'd wake up in the morning. Sometimes it would be 10:00 or 11:00 before he would wake up. But he was a hard worker.

Lois: He moved a lot of buildings, didn't he? He was kind of a building mover by trade?

Bob: Wally was a jack-of-all-trades. As I kept telling him, "You're a jack-of-all-trades and master of none." We've have quite a joke over that.

Lois: That's quite a skill, to move big buildings like that.

Bob: It is. When I was 16 years old, I was working for a house mover. In fact, we moved a big dance hall from Lignite, North Dakota, down to Battleview. That was after I came back from the service. I needed a job, and I went down and saw Old Pickle Dill. Fred Dillsworthy was his name. Pickle Dill we called him. He was a cripple who walked with two canes and couldn't hardly use his legs. He'd drive a car using two canes to push the clutch down, then he'd slip his foot over on the throttle. Everybody knew him, and everyone would give him the right of way. A problem would come up, and he would be laying flat on the ground, trying to figure out a solution. And when he'd come up, you'd

better be ready to go to work, because he would holler out, "You do this. You do that." And everything would go up just perfect.

In fact, I learned it so well that when I was an iron worker, I used it when it came to the big drill press. That was 20 tons, and they couldn't figure out how they were going to get it off the flatcar. I said, "Well, that's no problem." I'd just do it the way Fred did it.

Bob Neils couldn't figure out how it was going to be done, and when I told him how I was going to do it, he said, "Well, you do it your way." We rolled it off onto the flatbed. He asked, "Now how are we going to get it off and onto the foundation over there?" I said, "The same way. We're going to jack it up." I told him, "When we roll it over, if we can't stop, you'd better have the big D8 sitting there so that it will stop. It won't be moving fast, but it will be moving." We never even had to have the D8.

Lois: What year did you sell to Mary Bassingthwaighte?

Bob: In 1994.

Lois: How many years did you live in that cabin?

Bob: About ten years.

Lois: Were you there year-round?

Bob: No. Just from April until the last of October. We had to get out of there before November 8<sup>th</sup>, or we'd be snowed in. One year when they were building the bridge and the road up, we had to stay there and didn't get out until November 10<sup>th</sup>, and it was 8 below and snow.

Betty: Crazy, crazy.

Lois: Yes, you have to come up a little rise to get to the road, don't you?

Bob: Yes.

Lois: Well, it sounds like your adventure at the store was eventful and memorable, but you were ready to let it go when you did.

Bob: Yes. After shoveling all that snow. When we started, the snow would come off the store and onto the living quarters, and we would have to keep that off or it would have collapsed. Every day we were out shoveling. When we started shoveling, we were throwing it down. By the end of February, we were throwing it as high as we could throw it.

Lois: You run out of places to put it.

Bob: That's right.

Lois: Did you have livestock there? Did you have horses then, or cows?

Bob: We had the horses there.

Lois: There was already a corral or a paddock of some kind, right, because Ted had horses?

Bob: The old barn was there. I've got a picture of that.



Shoveling snow off the roofs of the porch and the addition at the store was a never-ending winter task.

Lois: I sure hated to see that barn burn. That was sad.

Bob: Yes. It just about burned the store, too. The crew broke into the store and got up in there and put it out. They had it all locked up.

Lois: Did you see the story in last week's *Flathead Beacon*? It was about the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fire.

Bob: No, I didn't.

Lois: The incident commander said he'd seen the roof flapping, and he saw that there was a fire going. They called Chyrs Landrigan, but they were going to go ahead and break in. He said he had his Pulaski or his axe, or whatever. He hit the window thinking he was going to break, but it was Plexiglas, and it just bounced off.

Bob: Yes, that was too bad.

Lois: Do you still get up to Polebridge at all?

Bob: We were up there last summer. They took us up there. Our grandson from Alaska was up there when this fire started. We didn't get to see him. He had to get back. He's an engineer. He had so much time off, and that was it. They said, "You get back here. We need you." He works for some big company. I think they're in oil and gold, both.

Lois: Well, I want to thank you for your time. We really appreciate it.