

Oral History Interview with Esther Chrisman

August 27, 2013

Present: Esther, Esther's daughter Kari Wiley, Debo Powers

Debo: My name is Debo Powers and today is August 27, 2013. I'm interviewing for the first time Esther Chrisman. This interview is taking place at 305 Salish Court in Kalispell, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So Esther, tell us a little bit about your early background, where you were born, where you grew up.

Esther: I was born in a little town called Leland, Illinois, LaSalle County. The date was 7/12/27—it's been a day or two ago. I was the youngest of five daughters. My father was a small-town carpenter. Probably he built houses and such, too. Both of my parents were immigrants from Norway, and he started out barn building when he came here. He detested two things in his life. One of them was chickens, and the other was bedbugs, which he had plenty of with those old barn-raising tours.

Debo: So, you spent most of your childhood in Illinois?

Esther: Yes. And then I married. I went to school at Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. It was actually called "The Athens of the West." It had an illustrious history. It was founded in 1829, so it was the first college west of the Alleghenys. It's a very small college. It has a Phi Beta Kappa chapter. It's right up there with best buys on the list, and so forth. It's only 20 miles from my married home, so I kept connections with it. I married young. My husband and I met at Illinois College and were married in 1948.

Debo: When did you first come to the North Fork?

Esther: In 1949. I was actually 22. [Laughs] No, it was a great adventure. The first year we were married we had a vacation. We went to the Tetons and spent a month there. See, my husband was in the grain business. He had an elevator, and there was always a lull between the wheat and the beans and the corn. So, nothing much was going on during the early months, so we poked around in the mining camps. I swear, Central City had gravel roads then. We looked at the face on the bar room floor and we just poked around. We stayed in the Tetons. We did everything but climb the mountain. We weren't hikers; we were horseback riders and figured we were done with that. It's beautiful.

So, the next year . . . Orville and Helen Foreman are very important to our life, both here and in Illinois. Baird's father died at the young age of 61, and Orville was Baird's father's lawyer, so he became Baird's lawyer and kind of a father figure. So, in 1949 Orville had encouraged us to come to Montana. They had purchased their place probably in 1948, which is the former Peterson place up north [of Trail Creek]. They had two homesteads, so he encouraged us to come out and we did. So, my first trip to Glacier [Park] was when we stopped to see Helen where she was staying at Kelly's Camp [on Lake McDonald]. She and the kids were there. Peggy, their

oldest, is not much younger than I. Orville had just left with the kids, taking the first load of furniture to their new cabin on the Peterson place, so that was the beginning of the North Fork.

Debo: So, that was the first time you saw the North Fork?

Esther: This was actually the first visit to Glacier. We didn't spend our whole vacation with them, but we did go up and sleep in a tent and help them scrub out. Their bunkhouse was a garage, and so forth. We met Emil Peterson, who was notorious . . . the mildest most gentle man. It's hard to believe later on I found out he was the one who shot Billy Kruse. [Laughs] But this was the beginning of a long history with the Foremans and us. I think they would be called mentors. We weren't bosom buddies, but we shared dinners and we went out to dinner and such, but not like your next door neighbor or some contemporary. But they were just wonderful to us and very important.

Debo: At what point did you decide to buy land up here?

Esther: Well, we had been camping in Glacier, at Avalanche Campground. The first year that's where we set up housekeeping. We traveled often with Baird's sister, Garnett, who was married to Bob Crow at that time. It was about four years before we had any children. So, we would go and help the Foremans for about a week. We didn't just land on them and spend our whole vacation with them. But we did hiking in the park and we considered this one campground in Avalanche ours, and it was for years. The first year they were doing all this construction on Logan Pass. They had big trailers in the back of Avalanche where they spent the summers, so there were people there, the same people all summer. We did a lot of hiking on this side. Oh, we were so picky. We thought it was really ugly on the other side of the Park. We just loved the big trees, and of course we had friends here in Kalispell. When you went under the viaduct you were out of town. The trees were still a little recovering from the 1910 fire, and it was really ugly until you got to the North Fork and the Park.

Debo: You thought it was the most beautiful?

Esther: Yes. But since then we've changed. I remember one particular hike to Granite Park Chalet and over to Many Glacier. I can remember the day was so hot. I've never made the trip again. [Laughs] One little spot where we got a drink, and I thought, argh—I don't like this.

Debo: What year was it that you bought land?

Esther: 1958. When we had children, Allen made his first trip to Montana when he was three months old. We had a ranch down in Polson, also. We had hoped to live there, but those plans fell through. We had even picked the spot for our house and so forth, but you know, pipe dreams are made of that. Anyhow, he had bad tonsils and asthma. He couldn't stand the variation in temperature from day to night—it was too great for his little lungs. We camped with him and such, but he just couldn't stand it. We had to have shelter, so after the kids were born we would stay at Foreman's lake cabin, and we did a lot of work there, and we rented Ralph Thayer's, although he wouldn't take any money for it. We still have the table on the Hammer cabin porch that we found at Ralph Thayer's and hammered together. And Nancy added to our rocks at the

doorstep that we had brought up. He told us, when we were down there, that if we needed another mattress he had a brother who lived down at Home Ranch Bottoms. That was a bear grass mattress, and we might want to go down there. You could tell his place by the big spruces right by the gate. I can't remember who has it now, but anyhow we went down and picked it up and brought it back to the camp and rolled it in. I can't, for the life of me, remember where we slept in that cabin.

Debo: What was it that you loved about the North Fork early on? What drew you there?

Esther: Well, it was not sweltering like Illinois, and it was just the adventure of it. Just looking at those beautiful mountains. We had a preference for the tall trees. At that time we were young and fickle. Just going through all the states between here and there, counting, playing games about how far was the next hill. But as the years went on we discovered that there is beauty in every area. In fact, when we went back to Illinois to see the corn and the beans and such that we had taken for granted, we realized . . . it's beautiful.

Debo: Sometimes the North Fork teaches you that. It teaches you that there's beauty everywhere.

Esther: Yes. But the Foremans were responsible for most of the people we met in those early years. Ralph Thayer and the Holcolms [Harry and Lena] were so dear to us, and later on in 1958 the Sondresons. The Wurtz's [Frank and Ella] . . . I don't know why. I think we tended to have a neighborhood thing. We stopped and bought things from the Wurtz's. Just like I know the Maas's [Paul and Maxine] were close, they stayed close by the Wurtz's. They knew personal things about the Wurtz's, but we didn't. They were acquaintances, and we thought highly of them, and we stopped there to buy her moccasins and her gloves and stuff.

We bought our place in 1958 from Bart Monahan. I wrote a bio essays. One of my bio essays was on our little cabin. Baird and Orville had gone down to try to speak to Bart about purchasing that homestead. He was very hard of hearing and heard nothing. Somehow, they went down there and Bart had some ungodly inflated idea what his property was worth. Somebody who had tried to lease it for oil or something had given him this big song and dance about how much it was worth. The Foremans had bought their homesteads for \$10 an acre.

Debo: Wow. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Esther: Yes. Well, at current prices we wouldn't have been up there. It was bad enough. I mean, we had to really suffer to buy the place, and I know Larry Wilson has always said they thought we had gone crazy. I don't remember the exact number, but we paid something between \$6,000 and \$7,000 for the Bart Monahan homestead.

Debo: And it was 160 acres?

Kari: 150.

Esther: But the thing about it is, that was a lot of money and we had to pull in our belts and do without a lot of things to pay for that. Then the next year Loyd and Ruth [Sondreson] discovered

that he had lupus, and the doctor said he would only treat him if he went to live at the coast at sea level, and he had the property next to us. So, having to leave North Fork and so forth, he sold us the Tally place. And it was a good thing, because we were getting water from a spring which was right between the two places, but that's how we wound up with the acreage that we have.

Debo: Which is how much?

Kari: 310 acres.

Esther: Yes. But the evolving of this, our North Fork life, we were introduced mainly through the Foremans, to the mailman, Ralph and Esther Day. Ralph died, Esther took over. And Ma and Pa Holcolm. When we bought the Monahan place, it was this little shabby cabin that the bears had hibernated in the basement and it was just . . . We thought maybe it could be a tool shed or something. We just couldn't imagine living there. Ma Holcolm was always cheerful. I never heard her say an ugly word to anybody about anything. She said, "Oh you'd be surprised what a little whitewash would do," and I thought, "Horrors!" [Laughs] But then we thought seriously about it and thought if Ma Holcolm thought it was worth salvaging we would. But this cabin is a work of art in itself. It was put up with bark on the logs. Monahan had lived there I don't know how many years.

We've never been able to get much history on him. I mean he was some kind of a government employee. In later years Baird and Ed would go up for hunting expeditions. In fact, one year Orville had a bunch of his lawyers, bankers and so forth and he invited Baird to go with them. Baird said, "Why do you suppose he's asking me? [To be the] a dishwasher?" [Laughs] But, you know, he was a younger, able-bodied somebody to come along and help. They had a wonderful time. Our local banker, Johnnie Peters got lost. He meandered down because our place through the woods isn't far from Foremans. He was lost and he saw Bart Monahan sitting inside playing solitaire at his table in front of the window. He got no response, because Bart was deaf as a post. So, we had to wait until Bart died.

He went to the county home. For a couple of years the cabin was empty when he went down there. So, Orville was out here and took care of the business end of the buying. He bought it for us at the estate sale. We were still back in Illinois. So, that's how we got it.

Debo: And you knew a lot of the early homesteaders up here? You knew the Holcolms, for instance. Who all did you know up there?

Esther: Oh well, let's see. Pa Holcolm and Ralph Thayer came to survey the ground after we purchased it. We pulled a travel trailer out there, because we discovered that the kids got sick by eating in restaurants. They slept in little slings above our bed in the trailer. We had a little refrigerator, and we had a shower and a stool in the trailer. What we did was sink a gas can out there for our septic thing in the dirt. So, when they came to survey I had to fix them lunch. Tin cans of what? I had to bake bread every day. I tried to do it in the morning. The kids were asleep in their down bags, and as soon as they started stirring the down would come flying up. We must have eaten more down. They would eat up all the bread I made. You know, with a little stove and a little pan. They would eat everything I made in one day; that's why I had to do it every day.

It was during that time, I was so rushed and such, I thought well, I hadn't seen any bears, so without washing them out, and having limited water, I would throw them in a pasteboard box outside the door. Well, that was my first awakening. In the middle of the night, I heard something and I looked out there. It was a moonlit night, and here was the biggest black bear you ever saw just sitting up there posing. That bear hooted and hollered. Well, it wasn't but a few nights later I thought the bear was back. Baird went out with his flashlight. I was looking out the windows, and he kept saying, "Don't you see something yet?" "No, nothing out there." Well we didn't sleep well, and the kids were sleeping up above us. We could see the canvas shaking.

Debo: The trailer was shaking?

Kari: Yes.

Esther: The next day he was going up to help the Foremans with a project. Baird says he was late because he overslept, and said, "I think we had a bear last night." Orville said, "Hell no, you had an earthquake." It was Quake Lake and Yellowstone.

Debo: That was 1964, wasn't it?

Esther: Yes. [Laughs]

Debo: You thought it was a bear, but it was from an earthquake?

Esther: Yes! It felt like it was rocking the trailer.

Debo: You could feel the earthquake from way down there?

Esther: Yes. I didn't realize that.

Debo: What other homesteaders did you know?

Esther: Who were the people who laughed so much? The Elliotts?

Kari: Oh, the Raders [Fred and Lulu].

Esther: Yes, the Raders. [Laughs]

Kari: They had a really cool outhouse.

Esther: The first time I met them was hunting season. They came up and we slept in the loft in the Foremans' homestead cabin. They slept downstairs, and we didn't have a lot of light, so we'd go to bed pretty early. I can remember just about rolling off the mattress upstairs because they were so funny. Madge and Ollie [Terrian] would come down and have dinner with us. We would make snow ice cream. We would send them little things. I remember one January we had a nice

note from Madge, thanking us for whatever thing we had sent them for Christmas. She said, “Ollie doesn’t have his elk yet.” [Laughs] Let’s see, who else.

Kari: Ralph and Esther Day.

Esther: Yes, they were the mailmen. We had a wonderful relationship with them.

Debo: They had Ray Hart’s place, didn’t they?

Kari: Yes.

Debo: Or I should say Ray has their place.

Esther: Not only that, but the Holcolms provided our first water tank. It was in a tree, and it ran back into the cabin. It came from the Holcolms. When we bought the cabin Bart Monahan had a little heating stove. Esther Day said, when she was moving to town, “You take my stove and I’ll put the one you have here,” so in Ray Hart’s cabin probably is Monahan’s little stove, but we have this little enamel stove in the cabin. Ralph, after he had a stroke . . . I don’t know whether I should say this or not, but we helped them buy the place downtown. So, when she had a chance to sell their place, half of it, she wanted to repay us with the other half, so we owned the other half of Ray Hart’s place. We let Bud Holcolm have it, which he lost. But we used to come out hunting and Bud Holcolm, the son of Harry and Lena and Esther Day’s brother, used to meet us at the train and take us up. I can still remember how awful it was. They had a little coupe of some sort. I mean, he was just wonderful to do that. You know, that was a long way in the 1950s.

Kari: Didn’t he or someone have a woody station wagon, who used to pick us up?

Esther: No. The Foremans had a station wagon.

Debo: Did you mostly come out in the summer or during hunting season?

Esther: We only missed one year of driving out at least once every year, and often we came on the train. In later years we flew out.

Debo: How long would you stay?

Esther: We missed one year, the year Kari was born.

Debo: How long would you stay?

Esther: Early on we would only spend a couple of weeks. We would work like crazy and barrel out here and barrel back. But we had a wonderful time. By the end of Baird’s life we were spending five months, which was ideal. He finally had somebody who could take care of his business. It was always our desire to live here, but there was just no way we could make a

living. When his installation in Meredosia [Illinois] sold more fertilizer than they sold in the whole state of Montana, fat chance we could live on what he could sell here, and elevators . . . He had an elevator, too. He had partially retired, supposedly.

Debo: When you came up to the North Fork what was the social life like?

Esther: Well, we were there for the beginning of the hall [Sondreson Hall]. Madge had donated the land, and I think Baird helped. But, you know, when you're only there for a couple of weeks you're not really part of it. Early on they had square dances over at [John and Mary] MacFarlands. I probably shouldn't tell this either. I was so young and naïve, we got over there and I didn't know any of the people other than Helen. Of course, she knew everybody and was talking to them. I stayed next to my husband. He went outside during intermission, or whatever. I went out and, my God, they were passing the bottle. [Laughs]

Debo: I've heard those stories.

Esther: I didn't know what to do. You know you're so young and you're so worried that you're going to look bad or appear stupid, and it's not easy to do. [Laughs] But I managed. But no, they were very nice. I remember one year we were there for a Halloween party during hunting season and it was most fun. They bobbed for apples. They had them on strings, and I still remember gnawing an apple with a Walt Hammer. [Laughs] He built one of our cabins, you know. It's really funny, because even on the closet doors the handles are way up here.

Debo: He was a tall guy?

Esther: Yes. He put them where he wanted to open the door.

Kari: Later on, when I was a teenager, they had pie socials.

Esther: Oh yes, all those pie and ice cream socials.

Debo: We still have those.

Esther: They would have the square dances. What really amazed me was there was never a Saturday night at midnight that somebody didn't have baked beans. They always brought baked beans, you know. It was part of any gathering.

Debo: I had heard that they had the square dance and then they would stop at midnight and eat.

Kari: Yes.

Esther: Yes, that's what we did. And it was really wonderful, because it was everybody from age 6 to 60. I can still see Mark Holcolm dancing with his grandma Lena, things like that. It was just one of those things.

Kari: Florence Gaffaney out there dancing with us.

Esther: Yes. And Larry Gaffaney dancing with Mona [laughs]. The thing is, I'm very good friends with Naomi and she's well aware of her family.

Debo: When I first started coming to the North Fork and going to the hall, they used to talk about Granny Chrisman's pies.

Esther: Oh God.

Debo: Who was Granny Chrisman?

Esther: She was my mother-in-law. [Laughs]

Debo: Tell me about her.

Esther: She was the most remarkable woman. She was a licensed practical nurse, and if anybody needed the laying on of hands when they were sick. She had this wonderful demeanor, but boy she went crazy when she thought talk was about her grandkids.

Kari: Talk about Granny, not her grandkids. [Laughs]

Esther: She was quite a character, and she lived to 90. She died out here. We brought her out, or sent her out, or she came on the bus. We had to go back. Her pies were another thing. [Chuckles] She made these pies.

Baird's sister, who lives here in town, Granny would come out and spend the summers with her. She stayed with Garnett, and then we would take her back home. Garnett went down to Arizona in the winter time, so we would take Granny down there and Garnett would keep her for months, and we would have a vacation and then take her back. Garnett bought Madam Queen's cabin. The kids helped her do that. We tried to buy that first, before we bought Monahan's, but they weren't ready to sell. But by the time we'd started ours and such, they were. It was 5 acres. It was a cute little cabin. I lost my train. What were we talking about?

Debo: Granny Chrisman, her pies.

Esther: Well, she came out on the bus. Garnett lived in Jackson, Wyoming, and she had to drive down to Rock Springs to pick her up one year. Well, one of her boxes didn't come through, and it's a long way from Jackson down to Rock Springs. So they went down to get the box, and it was full of Kleenex and lemon pie filling. Everybody thought Granny made these wonderful pies; they were out of a box. [Laughs]

Debo: Oh really?

Esther: Yes.

Debo: I was a young adult, and they would have those auctions at the hall and her pies would sell for \$45.

Esther: I know, I know.

Debo: Which was a lot of money.

Esther: You bet, and it was just unconceivable. She did have a way with her meringue and such. I mean, not everybody can even make a box pie, but she kept my kids chubby during their childhood with cookies and pies. One of Baird's finest dogs had an appetite for pie crust. After Sunday dinner everybody went out to look at the garden, or something. This was back in Illinois. Granny had brought pies in and set them on the kitchen table. When we came in, all the crust was gone from them. That was Lassie.

Debo: You told the story about the bear that was actually an earthquake, but were there other animals that you saw or had encounters with?

Esther: We ain't never had an encounter, but we had lots of them pass through, when we lived in the Hammer cabin.

Kari: The spring, when we kept food in the spring.

Esther: Oh yes. Refrigeration...in fact we were talking with Jason the other day about what stage you threw out the hamburger. Peel off the outside blue stuff. I don't know why we didn't die, but anyhow. [Laughs] We had one of the old camp pails, a good, heavy aluminum bucket, and we would put stuff over there in the spring, like the milk. Kari learned early on if she didn't want to eat something she would say it was "sour." It could be meat and vegetables—"It's sour."

I sent the kids over there. The kids weren't too sure that they were safe in the forest. Baird put them up a swing back along the hillside. I saw this big combat going on back there, and I thought, "Well, it is pretty close to the deep, dark forest." They were a little scared back there, so we started this hooting. Wherever they were they hooted, and so if they were a little unsure we would hoot back so they would know somebody was close. The hooting went on for quite a while. One time I sent them to the spring to get the big aluminum bucket, but it wasn't there. Well, they found it, and there were big jaw prints right in it, so we knew that the woods were inhabited.

Kari: And more recently we've seen a lot.

Esther: Yes. One year we had I think eight different bears. It was a year when it was droughty and there were no huckleberries, very little to eat. We had eight different black bears come through. Baird peppered them with birdshot. We never saw the same one twice. But last fall when Allen and Tim were up there last fall . . .

Kari: During hunting season.

Esther: Yes. Allen takes his bear spray whenever he goes up there and he does a lot of work. He carried his gun when he discovered that he was walking down to turn the generator off or something and the snow was falling in the bear tracks. So, there's evidence that they're there, but they have really never been trouble.

Kari: Except one, the Giefer Grizzly.

Esther: Oh, yes. He got into the homesteader cabin, and we thought it was so clever. He had pushed the door in and actually the whole keeper had gone out. He just pushed and had strength enough to do this, but there was nothing to eat in there. There wasn't any grease or anything, but he found baking powder and baking soda and got into them. He was wet, and we thought it was so neat, the soda and baking powder prints he left, and we didn't clean it up. But then we had to try get that gluey cement up. But this cabin, if you ever see it, you will be amazed. We had it all reconstructed after we got some other houses up and were comfortable. There's always a project on the North Fork. All the purlins are pitch black, and a lot of the logs had bark on them. We used pancake turners, screwdrivers, whatever to scrape that off.

Kari: We actually have videos of us doing that.

Esther: All the chinking was Monahan's underwear. [Laughs]

Kari: Long underwear.

Esther: Ralph Day, to make busy work for him, he and his brother came up and stayed and they were going to chink the cabin. Well, they weren't any master workmen and that chinking just kind of fell out, too. So Walt Hammer rebuilt the cabin for us. We had to put in a newel log and whatever. It's fixed up nice. Esther Day gave us a little table down there, a little tilt-top thing that had a place for our newspapers underneath. Baird made a little cabinet. He was no carpenter, I know. I about died when he made the first doghouse in Illinois. I thought, "Ugh." It was held together by sixty-eleven nails. I looked like it was made of nails, and I thought, "I hope my father never sees that." [Laughs] Oh he made some beautiful things, like my table.

Kari: He built this cabinet to make it mouse-proof.

Esther: Yes, and he fitted it inside. I mean not an overlapping door. We had this cabin where anything could walk in through the floors. I can still remember Granny cooking. We had a bench behind the stove and had the bacon back here, and she was cooking on the stove here, and there was a packrat up there that would eat the bacon behind her. [Laughs]

Debo: Oh, inside the cabin.

Esther: We would put our food in the cabinet that he built. The sink in there was Ralph Day's sink from the chicken house down there at the ranch. It was real Rube Goldberg. I was fortunate to have a husband.

Debo: So, life was really different in the North Fork than what you had in Illinois, wasn't it?

Esther: Yes, but it was the nicest thing. Well, I made a mistake though, one year. I had the *St. Louis Post* forwarded. We burned papers for days trying to get rid of all that paper and the advertising. I never did that again. But oh, it was wonderful in later years. You would get magazines, and you could sit down and read the whole magazine the day you got it. They didn't pile up like they do every place else. I loved getting mail twice a week.

Debo: I do too, yeah. And then on rainy days.

Esther: Oh yes, the rainy days. If you had groceries, you stayed home. If there was nothing in your refrigerator to feed somebody, you left. Either Harry and Lena or Ralph and Jessie were sure to come visiting. And Jessie was a character, too. She had, I guess it was a watercolor of [Jerry] Saltzer's, just nailed on the cabin wall.

Kari: Mom and dad are appreciators of western art.

Esther: After Jessie and Ralph died Baird and I tried to pursue that. We thought we would like to have that painting. Well, we paid through the nose for it because it went through Saltzer's grandson and I forget the artist over at the art gallery in Bigfork, but anyhow we did get the painting and it's nice. It's still got the thumbtack hole in the corner, but it's now framed.

Kari: We would get large groups of people like the Holcolms, Bud and Susie.

Esther: Ralph and Esther would get us a week's supply of meat at the meat supply and bring it up. I would get a big roast, and you would figure . . . well, some days Jack and Noni would come with all their kids, ma and pa would come. They would eat our whole week's supply of groceries. We ate things from tin cans. We ate chicken fricassee and Dinty Moore Beef Stew. When you ran out of refrigeration, you just didn't have it.

Kari: But I can remember playing cards on the porch with the kids, and it was just a real community type of thing.

Esther: Until the 1960s, when we built the Hammer cabin, we had this little homesteader cabin, and the screened in porch with the table in it. So, no matter what the temperature you had to eat on the porch.

Debo: That could be kind of cool out there.

Esther: Yes. They're sitting there with their winter coats on. We had wonderful experiences. Bud and Susie would come up and we would go hiking. I remember one of the last trips, before we had to get the kids home to school, we could drive up to Whale Lake. For some reason that year they had coffee in 4-pound containers. I remember Baird telling me take the soup pot, to see if we could get rid of the soup. We were going to leave the next week to go back to Illinois. So, he put the coffee can in and we went. The Holcolms were up there, and the kids were singing Jingle Bells because it was snowing like crazy all the way out. They were so grateful for that soup.

Kari: Back to animals, one summer was the year of the mountain lion.

Esther: My Aunt Helen would come over in the early fall and would drop off Mark and his friends. One year it was Halloween, because I remember I had cobwebbed the back door and made it spooky for the kids. I was always the first one up. I came down the stairs one morning and looked and here was a mountain lion looking in the window. I thought by the time I went up to alert somebody it would be gone, but there were three of them and they stayed. So, I went up and woke Baird. He came down and looked at them, and then got everybody up. I even have some photographs of the mountain lions looking in the window.

Another time I got up early when we'd had first gotten there. I started the fire and thought, "There's a lot of smoke here. I must have put too much wax on the stove or something." I went in the bathroom and there was so much smoke. I realized the stove had to be put out, and I'd just gotten it roaring good. I went upstairs to wake Baird. The smoke was right above his head in bed. "I think I have a problem," I said. He opened his eyes and said, "Yeah!" It turned out a bird had gotten down in the chimney and scraped it and all the ash went down. We had all those days when we had to clean the stove flue. Ugh. There were a lot of miserable jobs.

Debo: What was the road like when you first came up to the North Fork?

Esther: We came up from West Glacier, on the Park side, for long years. We were so stupid . . . we called them tamarack trees, but they were the yellow pine. I don't know whether they're still there. Any time Baird and I tried to take that Inside Road down after that it wasn't open, so we never were able to go back. That was where we'd eat. We'd have sandwiches or something on the way up. It took a long time to get up there. We had to cross the pole bridge and then come up. I can't remember what year we started [coming up the other way]. I guess it was when they reconstructed the road to Columbia Falls. But no, it was two grass-lined tracks. I was never comfortable going down those hills, and my legs would get tired from putting on the brakes. I can remember the old Fool Hen Hill. I used to hate it, before they put the fences [guardrails] up. I'm just not easy. I often wonder what happened, or where they took the road. I'm not smart enough to know. I've seen the name of the thing where they had the tree with the cabin in it, we used to come by on the road to Columbia Falls, a little cabin attached to a tree. I can't recall the name of the place where this cabin was. It's someplace to the west of the new road to Columbia Falls. I've seen the sign. I'll think of it at 2:00 in the morning.

Debo: I understand.

Esther: I remember Peggy and I, one time we drove . . . Esther Day had her mail route and then she would come back up. It was serious, it had been raining and raining, so Peggy and I went down with her. She had to go down to Columbia Falls and back up. I think she went across Blankenship, though, and then back to West Glacier and then back up to the North Fork. I remember grinding down Rabbit Hill in her little Plymouth or something, and mud this deep. Little glimpses like that I remember. I remember Peggy was collecting leeches for some class she was taking then, going to Mud Lake in the park.

Debo: Were you around on the North Fork for any of the big fires that happened?

Esther: Actually, in 1967 we were here. That was the first time we ever were close to a fire and it's the first time I heard a fire.

Debo: It was that close?

Kari: We were on our way to town.

Esther: Yes, we had to take Debbie down to get on the bus for the Tetons or Jackson.

Kari: For some reason we were stopped by the side of the road.

Esther: Well, they stopped us. That was when the Camas Bridge was just where they were saving the equipment, but that was where the fire was burning. It was all along there, and the noise was unreal. I'd never heard a fire before. And when the Red Bench fire happened we had stopped the mail. We had eaten most of our groceries and were leaving that weekend, and the roads were closed. So, we had no mail. I had gotten hooked on the *Reader's Digest* condensed books. I wanted them out of the house, so I had brought them out there. I reread every one of those. No mail, no nothing. We would go down and get the fire report and so forth.

Thank God, my son made fires real to me because I remember when Uncle Bug and I were there by ourselves, and we would have an electrical storm. I would think, "Oh, a fire is going to start and get us right now," and so forth, and being worried. Allen was on the Yellowstone fire during the time of the Red Bench fire. When he came up he was so ill. He, of course, has lung problems and allergies. They kept him an extra week down there doing some training for the next step up. He said, "I have to go back to my doctor." But he said, "You're safe. You have two creeks between you, and nothing is going to happen." All of the neighbors were loading their stuff and going down the road. Garnett with stuff on their trucks and getting out of there. But the roads were closed. They even closed it over the Trail Creek Divide. There we sat. He just made us realize that how fire burns is a real science and dumb heads like us have to have a stick over the head before we understand.

Kari: That fire of 1967 was influential in Allen's life. That's when he decided that he wanted to work in forestry. He wanted to fight fire.

Esther: What was the name of the guy who was the fire chief then?

Kari: Oh, I don't know.

Esther: He was a neat guy. You know, in the olden days all the road crew would come in and have coffee. During the course of the years we've met a lot of the people who came up. Baird would have an untold number of maps. Somebody was always coming in for a map, and so we met a lot of people.

Kari: I know what you always commented on, about the people up there, no matter what area of life you came from . . .

Esther: Yes, they're equal up there. The minute somebody came in and started talking about what they had back in their garage or something, it doesn't make a difference. That was one of the nicest things about the North Fork, that anybody who tries to pull top dog up there... You know, Baird and I had some pangs when we realized why people like the Holcolms had to sell their place. They needed the money, and the only way to make money up there is to sell your ground, unless you have some unusual talent. We learned so much from the homesteaders. The first thing Ma Holcolm told us is you want to make a road to the river first. She'd had the experience of a forest fire. But, you know, when that influx of young people came, with their little 10-20 acre spots, they didn't need any advice. They knew everything. They didn't stay long, either. Have you discovered this?

Debo: Yes. Most people have been up there a while.

Kari: Or come and go.

Esther: But the thing is that it's different than any other area of the country that I can think of, and it pays to know [how things work.] Of course, I've learned from Kari's husband, now dead. He worked on the cabin that we now live in. We thought, you know, there's a special way you do things on the North Fork. The first thing I know, a toaster came first. Pretty soon here was a microwave. Then an electric coffee pot. Hmm. Well, we turn on the generator and, yes, we've got power. He didn't much like making kindling, so he dispensed with kindling and used his blowtorch.

Debo: Sacrilege.

Esther: He was the best company. He was cheerful and joking.

Kari: He thought outside the box.

Esther: Then I got to thinking about Baird's mother, who always liked to do things the old way. My mother—boy, when they came out with cake mixes and instant coffee—my husband never forgave her for that. Why do this, after five kids? She was grateful. Anything new, she was for it. So, there's a happy medium. You don't throw the baby out with the bath water, but... Yes, we've had wonderful experiences up there. The bear boys, we're still in touch with one of them closely.

Kari: Chuck Jonkel's study back in 1975, 1976, when they were trying to capture the Giefer Grizzly.

Esther: The North Fork has people who have very strong opinions. And quick to judge.

Debo: I've noticed that.

Esther: Baird and I were really kind of traumatized, because these kids who were working for Dr. Jonkel were the same age as our kids. People were saying, "Don't come on my property,"

damning the process that they were doing under the auspices of the University, and so forth. I thought whatever it is, those kids don't deserve that. So Baird and I would tell them, "Look kids, you can come to our house. You can set your traps on our property." So, we had a wonderful relationship with them. I could write another book about that.

Debo: I bet they told you a lot of what they were doing, too.

Esther: They would go to town and pick up their bait and whatever they had. Beanie weanies. "Oh, last night we found steaks." Well, they were staying up at the Ninco Cabin. We didn't realize what high regard they had for us until they invited us to Ninco Cabin for dinner. I had never been to Ninco Cabin, so Baird and I went up there. They had drawn straws about who was going to stay home and cook. I thought to myself, "What are these kids going to do? We're going to eat out of the dumpsters." [Laughs]

Kari: It took forever to get there.

Esther: They had canned ham and they made apple salad. I can't remember a lot of things, but after it was all over they had bought a pint of whiskey. Thought maybe we would like a drink after dinner. [Laughs] They were just so dear, I can't remember what all we had. They did everything beautifully. But the thing about it was, they were eating on the old Forest Service plates, the engraved things. I thought geez, they should be preserving those. As much as I would have loved to have had one, but I mean that's not my cup of tea.

Debo: Well, I bet you've seen a lot of changes on the North Fork.

Esther: Yes. When we first came up, we didn't know any of the people. The mailboxes—no indication. I think that's was one of the reasons that people started vandalizing. They thought nobody lived there. They didn't know that there were people back in the woods, and even so now. But I know we came up the road, and the kids saw the names of the roads—Moose Creek, Whale Creek, Tepee Creek, and Trail Creek. And they would make up names for people—like Fig Newton, Frank and Ethel. They were such wonderful people. They were at our house for dinner one night and we had that sassy little dog. Frank was sitting there with a cracker in his hand and Tiny jumped up and ate the cracker. He said, "Did you see that?" We had awful dogs.

Kari: We have a lot of Frank Evans stories, too. And Ted Ross at the Polebridge store.

Debo: Did you know Burt and Thelma Edwards?

Esther: Yes, but it wasn't one of those close relationships. Allen, by the time he got to the University and was a forestry student, Burt was just fantastic. He was blind. He knew Allen and he would talk forestry things with him. I always had fun with Thelma. They weren't the kind to exchange dinner invitations or anything like that, but I might say that her kids were going to Sondreson Hall with our kids. Wes was the only one who was within the age group of my kids, but these big boys, the MacFarlands and the Edwards, with their cowboy boots and square dancing and just having a fine time, and the Maas girls, Karen and her older sisters, were dancing, and so forth. We had not experienced that. We did a few things because everybody else

did them. But when we went home, we decided we would take square dance lessons so we could enjoy the fun. Our kids wanted to join, too, and the caller said he didn't take boy and girlfriends because they always broke up. I said, "This is brother and sister," so they let them. It was great.

We brought a caller up—Max Roberts was a dear friend of ours, and he brought his friend. I can't remember his name. He was always talking about B.C., comparing our place with his place up in British Columbia. The Pittmans [Carl and Linda] offered to take them for a float and this man, I can't remember his name, carried a knife in his hip pocket and we had a rubber raft. I could have killed him.

Tim got home from the dance one night, and we were having our nightcap sitting there talking. Allen comes over and says, "Tim's got a pain in his stomach just like appendicitis." This was at 2:00 in the morning. So, we put him on the bench and figured he was really tender where the appendix would be. I can still remember your father saying, "Tim, if you don't have appendicitis, have them take it out anyhow." That was the only kid I ever had up there that I wanted to send with his bag down the road.

Kari: Mom and dad always had nieces and nephews come out with them more than my brother and I.

Esther: Yes. Tim got so . . . I don't know, I think Kari worked her magic on him. When we got home, his mother sent me an afghan. She had made one of those granny afghans, a beautiful thing. She said, "I don't know what you did to Tim out there this summer; he came home completely changed."

Kari: I just think the North Fork worked its magic. Really when you experience a place like that, it can be life-changing.

Debo: Yes, it can.

Esther: Well, then he got so quiet we couldn't stand him. [Laughs]

Debo: Well, we have just about come to the end of questions that I have. Is there anything that I missed or that you would like to add?

Esther: Well, I just can't express my appreciation for my own children, who like the same things that we did.

Debo: That's a blessing.

Esther: Both of them just love the cabin. I don't know whether Allen does all work or he partially hides out up there, but he's taking very good care of the place. Kari, of course, is still working, and she's the one who's tending me mostly, so she can't do it and have any fun. I hadn't thought about the people listening to this. [Laughs] Crazy old lady.

Kari: But all the things we've learned up there, you know.

Esther: Yes. I remember when Allen was promised a hunting trip. We raised a nephew, Bruce, too and the same offer was his. If you get all on the honor roll by the time you're a junior, we'll take you hunting. Because even then it was expensive to buy an out-of-state hunting license. Bruce could never muster it, but Allen did. I can still remember getting up there. Kari was just sitting and reading her books on the davenport. Allen would say, "You've got to get outside!" They would use old grocery boxes and go sledding down the hill.

You know, you have to make your own things. But the thing was, too, the congeniality of the young people up there. Ruth Sondreson always had all these nephews up there. I can't remember Ethel Newton's grandson.

Kari: Larry.

Esther: Larry. He was the one who was killed in the truck fire. He was one of the contemporaries with our kids. He would make the sound of Allstate Insurance, that horrible noise. They would get in their little boats and go over to Bowman Lake and get a big boat and... One time, I don't know how I cured my kids of ever having another party, but we had a party and it rained that night. They had to stand out under a tarp and cook hamburgers. They pushed everything back and got the square dance records from the hall. And here comes these big kids, Wes Edwards and the others.

Larry and the big kids were sitting there. They were from like 6th grade to high school. After high school you couldn't come. I remember one little gal from the Park—I never knew who she was, but she sat all the time on the stairway. They would only dance [until] they cut down the old pine tree, but then they all came in and sat down. I thought, "Oh, what are we going to do here?" So, in order to introduce them all I said, "Now, you give your name, address, and your zip code (which had just come in) to the person sitting next to you," and around the circle. Well, apparently that solved the problem, because it worked out well. They started talking. But you know, when you get a bunch of kids that age they can just be aargh! I thought I was in deep doo-doo. But I thought it was a great party, and the kids never would have another one. Never.

Kari: Speaking of kids, I remember when Richard Hildner was a kid.

Esther: Yes, Richard. Richard came up with the Foremans, and he hauled a lot of rocks for us and did some stuff.

Kari: Granny Chrisman made the big sugar cookies, also.

Esther: Granny would make sugar cookies. I remember him coming in and saying he'd never seen that many cookies in his life. Well, Granny was the kind that would use up all my flour and never tell me. Fifty pounds of it!

Kari: There was this huge pile. I mean, a card table sized table full of cookies. I can't imagine baking that many on a wood stove.

Debo: Me either.

Esther: I remember one time she was staying with us and we had the trailer. Orville and Helen would come for dinner and she did things like make fried chicken on the cook stove, and she made wonderful biscuits. She was in the little trailer baking biscuits. Of course, we were inside getting jelly and everything. She came in, and she told me afterwards, she came out of the trailer she dropped all the biscuits down in the dirt and just picked them and blew them off. [Laughs] This is at North Fork.

Kari: We all lived through it.

Esther: Well, things are different now, I know. They are always checking the sell-by dates on my canned goods and stuff. Look how long my mother canned using an open kettle—green beans and corn and everything. I never died. I'm sure we have different strains of stuff, but I don't intend to poison anybody. But with the price of refrigeration up there . . .

Debo: Anything more about the North Fork you would like to add?

Esther: Walt and Hazel [Hammer] were very difficult to get along with. When we started to have him work on our cabin . . . What prompted our first cabin was a *Woman's Day* magazine article on how you and your partner could build a cabin in a weekend, with 105 man-hours for \$100, and it was an A-frame chicken coop. [Laughs] Well, you know *Woman's Day*. Boy, when you're young you can do this. So, we got to thinking about it, because the mice were coming in and I'm not big on rodents. Baird built shelves above this cabinet where we kept our dishes and our food so the mice couldn't get them. And you never used the top plate. I got so callous about it, pretty soon it didn't make any difference, and I'd just take the plate off the top.

We went down to talk to Walt and Hazel about building this cabin and thought maybe a small one like they had, their two-rental cabin. It kind of snowballed. We had a wonderful relationship with the Hammers. Unfortunately, things weren't good for them up there. I could see what was happening, being an outsider, and they were baited and such, but they had so much to offer. He was so good to our kids. He would bring them skulls, and he would talk to them and taught them. They were just delightful, until it came to things that were near and dear, like highways and telephones. [Laughs]

You know, we had a difference of opinion there. But I think Larry Wilson had it right when he said, "You know what's wrong with them? Hazel says we're all going to hell in a hand basket, and Walt agrees." They were reading too much *Time* magazine. But, they took offense. It's like Tom Reynolds helped Walt at times on our cabin, but then they had a falling out. I learned after a long, long time, just listening, and I figured that the thing was that Tom had been going up to see Marie Peterson when Marie was up on Trail Creek and Hazel had made some remark about Tom courting Marie Peterson. A simple thing, you know. You just can't believe anything you hear on the North Fork.

Debo: It's probably true today, too.

Esther: Right. I know.

Debo: Well, I really have enjoyed this interview.

Esther: Can I give you coffee or tea?

Kari: We've got cookies out of the freezer.

Debo: Let me finish this up here. Anyway, I want to thank you for your interview and on behalf of the North Fork Landowners Association and the North Fork History Project – thank you.

Esther: You're most welcome.

[End of recording 01:15:56]