

## FERN HART ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

September 19, 2015

This is Annemarie Harrod, and today is September 19, 2015. I am interviewing for the first time Fern Hart. This interview is taking place in her beautiful home at Brookside Way in Missoula, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project.

Annemarie: There are a number of questions that I would like to see Fern answer, but she has full possession of the questions, so I look forward to hearing Fern talk about where she came from and a whole list of issues that have to do with spending time in this incredible place called the North Fork of the Flathead, also known as Polebridge, Montana.

Fern: Thank you. I was born in northwest Texas, in the flatland of the flatland. It was in 1928 on Leap Year's Day. We first came to the North Fork as guests of Robert Funk, who was a colleague with my husband, a professor, at Vanderbilt University. Robert had his sabbatical, so he said, "Come take time in our cabin, and I'll teach Ray how to fly fish. And you take the whole summer there." So, we came out. When we got to Columbia Falls we were asked to find a friend of Bob's at a garage. He drove ahead of us up the North Fork Road, and we followed in that rutted track, all the way past Polebridge up to Bob's house, which is by Ford flat.

It was the first year for us. Our boys were just about five and six. This was sometime in the early 1960s, and we still don't have the date set for when we first came. It was a surprise, but it was some beautiful country. The joy to us was that it was mountainous and green and that the rivers ran with water, which is not always the case in Texas. So, we started out with recommendations from Bob, who also came out to work with Ray on fly fishing, of people we needed to meet to get help. One of the first persons was Loyd Sondreson. The Sondresons were almost like the keepers of the North Fork. Loyd had a tractor. He also had a good garage on his property, where he had tools and could help those of us who were not used to generators and other equipment we needed. He could help us get started, and indeed he did that. Loyd was like the good doctor for all of us up here.

There were a few homesteaders that we got to meet—the Newtons I seem to remember. There are some who I can't remember. I think we weren't quite so social then, as we're social now. The life of the North Fork was pretty slow for me, because I spent most of my time with the boys and trying to make interesting things for them to do. One of the things that we did was to get magazines, like Sears catalogs or whatever we could find, and we would order things that would be sent up and come by the mailman, who came twice a week up the North Fork. Another nice thing the mailman always did was that he was willing to take a flat tire back down to town and get it repaired and bring it up to us. We had come out in a huge Chevrolet station wagon with our dog and everything we could think to bring, so our tires were not the best. Several times while we were here that summer we came with a flat, and it was the postman who helped us get back on the road again.

I think that the social life on the North Fork was very dependent upon whoever lived there and if they wanted to take a visit up the road. If someone came to your house, you went outside, and you visited for the most part outside. People did not necessarily come in, but they would visit up and down the North Fork. The Polebridge Merc was not nearly as furnished or supplied with things that we needed, and we would have to go into town, which we did like once a month. We would buy things that our boys could look at, and maybe we could order things that would keep us for another month there on the North Fork. I would take the laundry that I couldn't do by hand, which is the way we did the laundry, and get it all done. We would buy groceries that would hopefully last for a month. We bought a lot of canned goods, as I recall, and we stored them. We couldn't really buy fresh foods, except for that one day or two, because we couldn't keep it. We had no refrigeration. Though later, as I recall, propane refrigerators could be found. They were mainly gas refrigerators that were adapted to propane and that were very old. They were rejected by whoever had them in town, and then they were fitted out with propane. Some homesteaders would make a freezer out of that refrigerator, so they would have a way to store food. That was a great gift.

Our first summer on the North Fork was just a learning situation, and it was difficult with two active children to keep them interested. I remember taking a hike up the hill, across the road from the Funk cabin, and I got lost. I didn't really think you could get lost, if you could see the road. Well, we got high enough that I couldn't see the road, and of course there were not many people on the road, so I didn't hear anything. But we decided we would walk downhill and see where we came out. And sure enough, we weren't lost. We got there fine. It was a good lesson for a mother. I learned, truly, that you're in the wilderness, and it's up to you to figure out how to get out or how to handle it.

I think our food was strictly simple. Ray fished, and he's a good fisherman. We had fresh fish a lot. They were wonderful, tasty trout, and we really hadn't had experience with trout, certainly not in Texas where we lived. So, that was a gift to us to have that kind of thing in our diet. I also learned to tramp around the area and try to find lamb's quarter. I don't know if that's something that Montanans think about, but lamb's quarter is a weed that's very like spinach. If you recognize it, and you don't get false lamb's quarter, you have a very tasty weeds dish. I remember finding some, and I felt to lucky that, sure enough, it was good. We cleaned it up and enjoyed that.

As I said, we didn't communicate. We had no phones. There was a Forest Service phone. You could see it on different trees up and down the North Fork Road, and it was used by the Forest Service. If you had a communication from outside the North Fork, the Mercantile would take the call and if somebody came in the store who was coming up river, which we were, they would send the message up that the Harts had a package or the Harts had mail. The postman was very personable, so that we had backup from him all of the time.

We did enjoy floating the river. The Funk cabin had kind of a landing. Ray and the boys and I had gotten in the raft. We usually put in up at the border and floated down. As we came to our landing, we passed it. That's a little scary, when you have two little boys, though in life jackets, coming down the river, along with the dog. The dog always went with us. So, Ray jumped out and grabbed the rope on the raft and held it tight. It finally

pulled us back upstream to where we could get out. That was a scary thing in my life, although I floated many times after that, and I've been dumped in the river many times.

We had grizzly bears. We had not thought about bears when we first came out, but grizzly bears were very numerous, and they would raid wherever food was out, so we always had to take care not to empty food outside, even if we just wanted to toss it, because it would invite them. I remember one time, Bob had put fish to smoke in the smoker. The bear smelled it and, of course, the bear wanted it. Bob came running into the house, and the bear was standing in the door. He was as tall and broad as the door. It was pretty startling.

There was a time later in our time on the North Fork when we went down to the Polebridge Store. We got in the car and went down and stayed there until someone came up and tried to get the bear. Shooting a bear is not smart. If you don't kill it, you've got a wounded bear, which is a mad bear. We were there most of the night, and finally we all decided it was daylight, and we just came back up. You know, you get used to that kind of thing.

We also enjoyed the Polebridge Merc. It did not have nearly the supplies that it does now. Certainly not cinnamon rolls. It had what was a gift to us, a big cheese wheel. We could go down and buy a wedge of cheese, and it was about as fresh a food as we could get. So, that was a treat for us. I remember one time later in our time in the North Fork, Morgan, who was maybe older than eight or nine, decided he was tired of being in the cabin with just family, and he would walk to the Mercantile. And, by golly, he did. And people loved it. They picked him up and gave him rides, and he would have done it again and again. It was worth it to him. He got a real Coca-Cola.

I wish I remembered better the original homestead folks. I think this oral history will help everybody to do that. The Sondresons were so supportive. Ruth, Loyd's wife, was like the mother of the North Fork. And she could dance so lightly on her feet, when we went to the squares. Another gift about going to the square dances, which would be on a Saturday night, was Grandma Chrisman. She was truly a grandma, an older woman. She danced happily, and she taught my boys to square dance. She was Baird's mother.

I do not remember the organization of the North Fork Improvement Association then. It was probably functioning, but it was pretty low-key, I would suspect.

Actually, a surprise to me, coming out of Texas ranch and wheat land, was that it was free range cattle on the North Fork. When the boys got a little older, we bought yearlings, about ten of them, and they were to take care of them. Those cattle had hoof rot and pink eye regularly, then they got out because they had no fence, and we'd have to go and find them and get them back to where we could feed them and take care of them.

I told you a little about that first year. It was just a learning situation. About 1965, we bought a place. That was interesting, because it was a real homestead. The Funk place is pretty cleaned up, but the place we bought was owned by a man who came out from California, and he really only wanted to hunt. He'd bring his friends up. It was interesting on the North Fork. Bob had told Ray, "You can have a place on the North Fork when one

of the old-timers tells you there's a place you can buy. Otherwise, if they don't say it, they don't want you to come."

I'll try to pull this together. I'm trying to think how many years altogether we were on the North Fork. Many of those years, before Ray changed and took a position at the University of Montana, we were driving out from Nashville. I think it was by the time when the boys were about 9 and 10 that we moved out here. It was 1969. I can be sure about that. And, of course, we had gotten our own cabin.

I should describe our homestead. It was built for Esther [Day], I think. When I first got into it, it had been owned by this hunter, who could have cared less. I looked down at the floor. It had linoleum on it, and there were holes in the linoleum, and you could see four other kinds of linoleum underneath. The cabin really wasn't well built, but it had a wood stove, which we enjoyed. And a sort of a living room. I remember one time we came out from Nashville, and the house was full of dead birds. They had flown down the chimney, and they couldn't fly out, so they flew in and deposited their stuff all over the room and died on the floor. Those were just the kind of things that you got used to. And you got used to the mice. We had voles, really, kind of a country mouse with little country ears. They'll just come out and look at you. I set traps, and I caught voles, but you'd hear them every night after the house would get quiet and you were in bed. They'd run up the walls, across the ceiling, and back down the other wall. You always thought, "Well, they're not causing me trouble on the bed—they're up there on the ceiling."

The cabin was a gift in some ways, because it still had things that we could adapt. We had by then two propane refrigerators, and one that would freeze things so solid it took a day to thaw them. It was a gift to have all of that, and Ray is a good gardener. He always planted a garden, so we did well. There were always other families with growing kids, and they'd all get together and play volleyball or go down for the square dances. We had a full square of young people, after a time. It worked pretty well. We took a badminton set up there. There were kids around all the time.

We bought those yearling cows in the Kalispell livestock market. Some of the other families did the same with their kids, so we had a small herd of North Fork cows, free range. They would get back in the clear cuts, up Whale Creek, everywhere. We had a cow called the bell cow, and if we took her and she'd start back home with Ray leading her, then all these cows would get behind the bell cow and come in. It was a sight to see, this man with a stick, leading the bell cow, coming down out of the mountains. The boys hated the cows. They would never, ever be ranchers. Of course, the cows were always into things. They were a problem, but we had great joy there, because Loyd Sondreson had a lease on some land that was flat. It was used as an airstrip, and he would plant mountain hay. We would go up with all the kids, and Loyd had an old tractor and a mower. Ray would drive the tractor, and we'd have bales all over that area. Hay has to dry up there, because there's dew until late in the day, like 10:30 or 11:00. The women would make big lunches, and we'd go up there and have lunch. Then we would load those bales of hay onto one of Loyd's trucks and drive it down the North Fork Road and put it in his hay barn, so that the cattle would have hay for the beginning of the next year.

Bracken had figured out that this was not a life for him. He said to me one day, "Mother, you know what? There are people in Missoula who are doing things." So, I figured we

had punished him enough, and I came down and stayed, and he got a job in a livestock yard here in Missoula. I think that was one of his worst experiences, taking care of dead chickens that came in off the train. But actually, I think he learned a lot of lessons, and he decided right before his senior year that he would indeed go to college. He wasn't going to be working just anywhere. He was going to get some kind of an education. But that was a part of our lives that was so rich. That time when the kids were up into their teens, and they had friends, and we did do a lot of cooking and eating together and dancing together. I would say for me, it was the golden days. The weather was beautiful. It was a blessing we had so many good days.

Finally, Morgan didn't give up on it. I left Ray with the dog, and I came down here, and we did fairly well. Life changed after that. The boys finally both went off to college. The North Fork has been a part of our lives in such a fundamental way, ever since. Ray invariably has come back from every university he's taught in. And I will go up, and we have good friends. The gift to us is that Morgan and Patti seem to have adopted life on the North Fork. They know more people there than we do, and we are indeed the old, old-timers. They entertain. They have all sorts of parties and dances. They have auctions. So, it really is a fulfillment for us. It's a legacy, and we're grateful.