

Gary Haverlandt Oral History Interview

October 29, 2012

Debo: My name is Debo Powers and today is October 29, 2012. I'm interviewing for the first time Gary Haverlandt. This interview is taking place at his home in Columbia Falls, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So, Gary, tell us a little bit about your early background, where you were born and a little bit about growing up.

Gary: I was born in Helena in 1946, and we came to Kalispell and moved down by the Outlaw Inn. We had a house there where they've got the apartment buildings now. We lived there for a year or two. We moved to the North Fork in the fall of 1948 or the spring of 1949. I don't know.

Debo: Great. You already answered the question when you came to the North Fork. Where did you live on the North Fork?

Gary: I lived at the Wurtz cabin.

Debo: You were related to the Wurtz's, weren't you?

Gary: They were my grandparents, Frank and Ella. There's a picture of them on the wall.

Debo: That's great. Tell us a little bit about them. How did they end up in the North Fork?

Gary: My grandfather came when he was 20 years old. He came on a train; nothing so fantastic as a covered wagon. They liked Kalispell. He came for land. There was free land through homesteading. He went up to the North Fork in 1910 and looked for it, and he filed on it in 1913 where the homestead is now, and worked [to prove up on the land]. It's in my book, all the things that he did. Almost failed, but made a home there.

Debo: Tell us a little bit about your book, the name of it.

Gary: It's called *Wilderness Homestead*. It's my grandmother's notes that she wrote. She wanted it basically for the grandchildren, so we all knew what they went through when they were homesteading. I have written it up to that point but never published it.

Debo: But it is available to people?

Gary: I can print it out, yes. I self-publish it. It's expensive, though, to do that and time-consuming.

Debo: Tell me, of all the stories you wrote about your grandparents in the book, what stands out for you that you thought was a really great story about their life up there?

Gary: Well, getting to the North Fork took a week. They had a covered wagon and two horses that were undersized, and they came up the Inside Road. If you've been over that, you know. Big hills.

Debo: Yes.

Gary: And my grandmother had a little girl, my mother. I think she was about 10 months old.

Debo: Oh, she was a baby.

Gary: She was born in December. And she carried a rock; my grandmother carried a rock to put under the wagon wheel when the horses got tired. They could stop and rest and then go on another few feet. At times she would leave my mother laying by the side of the road because she couldn't carry both my mother and the rock, and so it was kind of a difficult journey.

Debo: Yes.

Gary: Now we complain about a few chuckholes. We still do.

Debo: It's nothing like what it used to be. So, when you came to the North Fork how old did you say you were?

Gary: I was 2½ to 3.

Debo: How come your parents moved up to the homestead there?

Gary: Well, my grandmother told my mother that if they would come up she would give them a quarter of the homestead.

Debo: That's nice.

Gary: She never did follow through on that, but they went up there, and my grandparents were out of town. They were leaving. I don't know where they went at that time. They went to Hot Springs, and she worked as a cook. So, my grandfather would be there part of the time and part of the time he wouldn't.

Debo: You were pretty young. What are your earliest memories of the North Fork?

Gary: I suppose waiting for the mail in the winter is one of them.

Debo: Did it come right there to the cabin?

Gary: It came right to the door, but it came on a modified snowmobile. My earliest memory was they had a big flatbed on the back that carried packages. I was just tall enough to look over the flatbed, and there was a big black wolf staring back at me, laying there, that the mail carrier had shot.

Debo: Wow.

Gary: With his fangs showing. [Chuckles]

Debo: Did it scare you?

Gary: Oh yes. I was always afraid of wolves because of their howl, I think. You knew they were out there.

Debo: What was North Fork like at that time when you went there?

Gary: Well, it's basically the same. It hasn't changed much, thank God. We still don't have a phone. We still don't have a road. We still don't have power, and we still have a bunch of good neighbors.

Debo: Great. That's right.

Gary: But we were snowed in, in the old days. They didn't even attempt to keep the road open. From the middle of October through the middle of April we couldn't get out.

Debo: And winters were longer and harder in those days, I think, and were colder.

Gary: I snowshoed in my parents' snowshoes in the yard. I would fall, and my mother would have to rescue me. We had a lot of things happen up there. If you needed a doctor, you couldn't get to town—there's no way. We didn't have search and rescue then, and my mother had an abscessed tooth. She had to take care of it herself. It made her face swell out, and she used hot packs until it broke, and then she was better. I remember one time we had probably between 12 and 15 foot of snow, and it was over the woodshed. My father went out to get wood, and my mother went out to the outhouse. I was in between and the snow fell on him and almost killed him and broke his leg.

Debo: Oh really?

Gary: So she had to splint it. I didn't know what she meant by splinting it. I thought she was going to operate on him or something. I'm screaming, so she had to take care of me and him too. She used a couple of lodgepole splints and wrapped it with belts and kept it as straight as she could. He hobbled around all the rest of the winter, you know.

Debo: And it healed okay?

Gary: It healed. It's a little bit crooked, but it healed.

Debo: That's amazing. When he broke his leg he couldn't go to a doctor. He couldn't go to town.

Gary: No.

Debo: He couldn't get anybody. She just set it and put a splint on it and it was just as good as it was.

Gary: A little bit later there was the McFarlands [Jack and Mary] with their plane. I suppose they could have done something.

Debo: But at that time nobody.

Gary: No.

Debo: That's a little scary to think about.

Gary: We had the Holcombs [Harry and Lena] and the Hammers [Walt and Hazel].

Debo: Were those your closest neighbors?

Gary: They were.

Debo: Tell us about them, the Holcombs and the Hammers.

Gary: The Holcombs were always a bunch of fun. They were very nice people. We would go and play cards with them until the middle of the night. They would come up to our place one week, and we would snowshoe down to their place one week.

Debo: How far was it?

Gary: It's a mile.

Debo: A mile. So that's reasonable.

Gary: In the middle of the night we were snowshoeing back. I remember my dad said, "Watch that moose, Louise." He went down over Knudsen Hill, and we followed the tracks in the night in the moonlight, and it never turned on us.

Debo: That's good.

Gary: We never did see it. [Laughs] That was a memory.

Debo: That's great. So, that was the Holcombs, and they were your closest neighbors, I guess.

Gary: They were, and then some other people came in and bought the Knudsen place. They were Fred and Lulu Rader. I don't know if you've ever heard of them.

Debo: I haven't heard of them.

Gary: They were really, really great people, and they also played cards with him. That's about all we did in the winter time.

Debo: How far away were they?

Gary: They were about a mile also, but it was just a little bit different trail to their place.

Debo: And you said the Hammers?

Gary: The Hammers were north of us, and they didn't want to associate with anyone.

Debo: They didn't? How far away were they?

Gary: They were about a mile, also.

Debo: But you didn't see much of them?

Gary: I never did see them.

Debo: What about some of the other early homesteaders in the North Fork? You probably knew a lot of them.

Gary: Well you know, at 66 I've forgotten.

Debo: Really?

Gary: It's been years. I remember Ralph Thayer, though.

Debo: You do?

Gary: He drove off the road at Fool Hen Hill and went straight down into the river. Almost killed him.

Debo: That's a long drop.

Gary: It broke his leg. He was rescued and put in the hospital, and when we went to visit him he had to show me how this poor mouse ran up his leg and the stitches were his tracks. I was pretty little; I believed him.

Debo: So, you knew Ralph Thayer and he was north of where you lived.

Gary: Just north. Marie and Tom Peterson, we were friends with them. Of course, we were always snowed in in the winter, and it was a little bit too far to walk, but Marie used to walk down and get her mail, because Tom was sicker and sicker. He was bedridden at the end, and his legs wouldn't work for him. I don't know what the story was.

Debo: Where was their place?

Gary: They owned where Mary O'Hare's place is now.

Debo: On Trail Creek.

Gary: Yes. I don't remember all of the neighbors, but I know there were a bunch of them. We had Christmas dinner always at our house. They would all come, and the house was full of people.

Debo: I bet that was fun. Did you decorate?

Gary: Very briefly, but my mother always made candy and bought candy and stored it away. You had to buy all of your groceries before the October 15th deadline.

Debo: That's amazing.

Gary: For the whole winter.

Debo: You had a root cellar, I guess, to put stuff in?

Gary: The root cellar was out back.

Debo: So, you just had to store all your food for the whole winter.

Gary: Stored it all. My only memory of that was we had butter after the war, and it came in plastic packets. You had to break the little center packet which was food coloring, because it was white butter, so we turned it yellow and mixed it. We had case after case of that.

Debo: At Christmas everybody would bring something to the Christmas dinner, or would your family just provide the whole dinner?

Gary: My mother cooked for everybody, did everything.

Debo: That was a lot of food to make.

Gary: She liked to cook for a group. We always had a ham or turkey and everyone was really happy, five or six different kinds of pies she would make.

Debo: Was there a Thanksgiving celebration?

Gary: Well, there was, but I don't remember. I remember just one Christmas, basically, but I know that they came to our house. People came, and we had a group meal often. We didn't have the hall then. It wasn't built until 1954, so everything before that was done in peoples' homes.

Debo: Were there other holidays that you celebrated as a community?

Gary: The Fourth of July. We always had a blast on the Fourth of July. We would catch fish. There were fish in the river in those days.

Debo: Right, that you could keep.

Gary: That you could keep, and you could catch as many as you wanted for the fish fry, and they didn't care. Sometimes we would have 80 fish, and sometimes we would have 3. If the river hadn't gone down right, you know. If it was a little murky you couldn't catch them.

Debo: What was daily life like in the North Fork that was different from how most people lived at that time? This was in the 1940s, right?

Gary: Right, the 40s. We left there in 1952 so I could go to school, and then I longed to get back on the North Fork every winter. It was in another world away, because I had to stay in school.

Debo: Where were you living when you had to go to school?

Gary: We lived at Trego until 1958, and then we came back to the valley.

Debo: So, how was life outside the North Fork different from life in the North Fork?

Gary: Well you know it's really funny, we had an outhouse at school and it was modern.

Debo: A modern outhouse?

Gary: Modern. It was really busy with people all around. It was like living in the city for me, a population of 200, you know.

Debo: Right. It would be a city after the North Fork.

Gary: We had power, we had water.

Debo: Most of the modern conveniences. But not on the North Fork.

Gary: Not on the North Fork.

Debo: Can you remember anything else about social life in the North Fork? You played cards in the winter time, but were you around when they had all the square dances?

Gary: I was there right from the beginning, playing on lumber piles. I don't remember with who, but there were a bunch of us that kind of grew up together up there. Tom Edwards was one, and I think Alan was running around.

Debo: Alan McNeil?

Gary: Yes. And we played on the lumber pile while they built the building, the lumber for the roof, you know.

Debo: This was when they were building the Community Hall?

Gary: Yes. I don't remember too much about the construction; I was still pretty young, but once it was done we had a really great time there. It's always been special place, ever since then, and still is when I walk in the door.

Debo: A lot of memories, huh?

Gary: It's like just being back then.

Debo: Yes.

Gary: I wish we could have more square dances. I wish I could get people more interested in it. Four will have to do.

Debo: Four is a good start, for next year. I hear that they had square dances at the McFarland Ranch before the hall. Did you go to those?

Gary: Every other weekend. For a while we would go. It was for Mary's guests. She provided a nice place, and so every other weekend we would go to the McFarland's, at least one summer.

Debo: Every other weekend you would go there?

Gary: And every other weekend we would be at the hall.

Debo: So, every week you had a square dance?

Gary: Every Saturday.

Debo: I bet that was fun.

Gary: Well yes, we had girls around. [Laughs]

Debo: These were girls from other homesteads around there?

Gary: Karen and Beverly Maas [from Polebridge Ranger Station].

Debo: Do you remember other ones?

Gary: The Evans girls [April Evans and Sharon Luke]. There weren't too many. [Laughs]

Debo: But there were girls. So, you were pretty young at the time, but was your mom a member of any of the organizations in the North Fork?

Gary: We didn't have organizations like we do today. The basic association [North Fork Improvement Association], they were members of that.

Debo: You talked a little bit about what the North Fork road was like in those days.

Gary: Well, clear to Columbia Falls in places it was a single lane. I don't know if you knew about it, but just out of town by Bailey Lake there's a couple of miles where there was two one-way lanes. One went one way, and now and then you'd meet somebody coming up the wrong way, but it was just basically a single lane. The road's still there. You can see part of it, but basically the road was a single lane that you had to find a turnout to pass anything.

Debo: So, you probably had to go pretty slow, too.

Gary: We didn't speed on it, no.

Debo: Was it gravel?

Gary: It was gravel. In places up north it was just clay, still is and it's kind of hard to stay on it when it gets wet. My father actually did the road work up there.

Debo: He did? What did he use to work on the road with?

Gary: He graded it.

Debo: With a regular tractor?

Gary: A regular grader, and he continually worked through the summer. He worked different sections of it. I remember going down and sitting in Polebridge. Out at the road there was a big fir tree. We would sit under that tree in the car in the shade, try and stay cool and wait for him. You know 14 miles was too far for him to take his car.

Debo: There were no phones up there, and there weren't any radios in those times, I guess.

Gary: There were no radios.

Debo: How did people communicate?

Gary: We had the old crank phones.

Debo: You did, way up there?

Gary: Yes. Clear up to Trail Creek, and up to the McFarland's. When the phone would ring everyone would listen.

Debo: So, it was a party line, so everybody could hear everything.

Gary: Yes. The Sondreson's ring was 3 longs, 3 shorts and 3 longs, so you knew who was being rung.

Debo: So, you knew the Sondresons, too?

Gary: Yes, Loyd and Ruth. They came to the valley very early and in a very humble beginning and made a good living with their saw mill.

Debo: Did you know Madge and Ollie Terrian?

Gary: Yes. They were good neighbors to the north. Ollie was the biggest character.

Debo: Tell me about that.

Gary: He was just an individual. I don't know that I could tell you any stories about him.

Debo: Other old-time North Forkers that you can remember? Did you know the Days, Ralph and Esther Day?

Gary: I knew Esther. I remember we had dinner one time at their house. I was sad to see it moved.

Debo: It was the little homestead cabin in front there?

Gary: Yes, but eventually the road will go over it, I suppose, if the river keeps eating away at that bank.

Debo: Yes, no telling what's going to happen with that. So, besides the square dances and the playing cards, how did you have fun in the North Fork? I know as a kid you had plenty of fun.

Gary: We would go camping at Trail Creek even when we lived up there.

Debo: Like just on Trail Creek, or where the campground is now?

Gary: Where the [Tuchuck] campground is now. We've been there for 60 years at that particular campground. I love it there. But the last time Kerry and I were over I said, "I don't know, that road is getting narrower and narrower to me." I'm getting to be a bigger chicken.

Debo: It is narrow. Were there any major events like floods and fires and ice storms that you can remember when you were living up there?

Gary: No. It was pretty calm.

Debo: It was calm in those days, huh? Just a lot of snow in the winter time.

Gary: Lots of snow.

Debo: Any other important events?

Gary: We didn't have a whole lot of fires because they were logging then. They protected the forest, and if there was a spark that got loose they would put it out right away. There were a number of lookouts in the area.

Debo: Do you remember which lookouts were up there?

Gary: Well, there was Numa Ridge. Cyclone was there. Thoma was there.

Debo: Was Thompson Seton still there?

Gary: It was, but I don't recall it.

Debo: Can you think of any other characters or leaders in the North Fork that you can tell us about?

Gary: Well, as I was growing up Loyd and Ruth came in, and they were really big leaders in the valley. They furnished the logs for the hall. A lot of money they just spent on the hall. People weren't asked to spend, you know. There was gasoline for the generator they bought all the time. They always brought an excess of food. Ruth ran the record player. I wasn't allowed to touch it.

Debo: Is that the same record player that was there? They played the same old square dance records?

Gary: The same old records that we have now. I'm so glad we got to digitize them.

Debo: Me too. Sometimes they had a caller come up, didn't they?

Gary: Occasionally a caller would come in, and Hunt, I think, was the name of the orchestra. She played the piano, and he would call the squares.

Debo: There used to be a piano in the hall?

Gary: Yes. I wasn't going to say anything, but where did that go?

Debo: I don't know. I have no idea.

Gary: Well, Ruth Sondreson found it in an abandoned building, I think at Kintla Ranch, and she helped herself to it and brought it to the hall so we would have a piano. [Laughs]

Debo: I wonder what happened to it.

Gary: I don't know where it left to, but that's how we got it.

Debo: Do you remember any close encounters with animals?

Gary: A lot of them recently...

Debo: Not back then?

Gary: Not back then. Grizzlies were afraid of people. They knew they weren't protected. They knew they could be shot at.

Debo: Right. And they were.

Gary: And they were, and they avoided people. I can't blame them because they know they're protected now. They're a smart animal, so now occasionally you run into them. They're not afraid of you. I've had a few run-ins up there. In a huckleberry patch I had a grizzly chase me out of it, and it almost got me. I got behind a tree. I hid until he went by and then I tiptoed up the hill real quickly. [Chuckles]

Debo: He didn't want you getting his berries.

Gary: No, he didn't.

Debo: Over time what kinds of changes have you seen in the North Fork? You said earlier that it hadn't changed a lot, but it has changed some.

Gary: There's a big change on our property. The buildings... a lot of the buildings are gone. It's sad. The front yard is torn up by sticks of wood being carried into it for the fire pit. We had a beautiful front lawn with flower borders around. My grandparents really took care of it.

Debo: So, that property looks a lot different now.

Gary: It looks a lot different, but nothing really basically has changed.

Debo: Now it's a Forest Service rental cabin.

Gary: Right, and you have to call New York City to rent it. [Laughs]

Debo: Yes, that's kind of funny isn't it?

Gary: We rent it, though, and we pay our dues and we enjoy it. Next spring I want to have a big get-together when everybody gets back.

Debo: At the Wurtz cabin. That will be fun.

Gary: You're invited.

Debo: Thank you. That will be fun. I'll be there. Any other stories you want to share?

Gary: Well, there's just one that I thought about. It was in the winter when we were hungry and our next door neighbor to the north was Ross Wilson, and his sons Larry and Joe were there. [Ross was the game warden.] My dad went out. It was not hunting season, in February, I think the first week. We had run out of food, and he shot an elk, and it went over into the slough by the road. He couldn't find it, so he came back to the house and got my mother to help look because he couldn't see very well, and off we went. We got down to the edge, and he pointed to where he shot it. And I said, "What's that mama?" Right down over the edge there was a big red spot in the water. "Shh, don't bother me now." So, they were looking and looking, and I said, "Well, right over there," pretty quick. Well, I'll be darn, there it was, so we had to drag it up and get it across the road without dropping any blood for Ross to find. People in those days wouldn't arrest you for feeding yourself, but there's no need slapping them in the face, you know. It was an interesting time. I felt like we were criminals.

Debo: I think the statute of limitations has probably run out since then, so they probably won't be coming.

Gary: I told Larry that story this spring.

Debo: You did?

Gary: He just laughed at me. "Yeah, we knew more than you knew we knew," he said. [Laughs]

Debo: Right. Well, these are great stories. Can you think of any others before we end the interview?

Gary: Well, probably not.

Debo: Okay. On behalf of the North Fork History Project I want to thank you for your time and thank you for your interview, and we'll be posting this.

Gary: Okay.

Debo: Thank you.

[End of recording]