George McFarland Oral History Interview

November 16, 2011

This interview was conducted by Gary Haverlandt and Jan Caldwell.

Gary: My name is Gary Haverlandt and today is November 16, 2011. I am interviewing for the first time George McFarland. This interview is taking place at the McFarland property on Big Prairie in Glacier National Park. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project.

George, when did you come to the North Fork for the first time and why?

George: My parents purchased the Finton homestead on Big Prairie about 1942. They ran some cattle and hired two men that stayed there. I don't quite recall what year I came up. There was a lot of state land inside the park at that time. There was a small prairie south of the Polebridge Ranger Station, and we got a lease to cut hay on it. I remember helping to put up hay, maybe about 1944. That's the first recollection I have, and then the family came up in the summertime about 1946. Then the first winter they stayed over is about 1947.

Gary: Do you remember about how old you were?

George: No. My teenage years.

Gary: What are some of the earliest memories that you have of the North Fork?

George: Eventually, we had the dude ranch, so I wound up taking people out on tours, 3-hour horseback rides. Then in the summer we put up hay on the main ranch. Maybe like all teenage people that look back, the summers went on and on forever. They seemed like they were a good four months long, but we spent a lot of time turning up hay. Seemed like they were a good four months long. We had a big haystack, and we also had a big barn that had a special cable outfit, and big tongs that you could take hold of a stack of hay and hoist it up into the barn.

Gary: Mostly you had a lot of work to do.

George: Yes.

Jan: What was the North Fork like as you remember it?

George: I remember going down to the Polebridge store. It was still operated by Bill Adair. To get gas, there was a pump on the front porch with a large glass window. For how many gallons you wanted, Bill would operate a big handle and then the gas would come up to 1 gallon, 2 gallons, 3 gallons. I remember one time Matt Brill came down. He and his wife operated the Kintla dude ranch up in Trail Creek. Those were some of the old-timers that I didn't speak to but just briefly there.

Jan: As you think back to that period, what other North Fork residents made an impression on you?

George: Scottie Beaton, who was on Numa Lookout. He had just sort of retired shortly after our family had moved here. He had the distinction of being up on Numa for 20 years and not having reported a false fire and not having missed a fire. He retired with a special commendation from the Park Service. We had a lot of ditches to dig and things, and he would come over and work, and sometimes us boys would ski over to his place in the winter time. He had a small homestead set up on Akakola Creek. Right behind the ranger station there was another homestead by an elderly man named Henry Covey. His nephew Jesse Bemis was just a few years younger than he was. Jesse lived on that homestead, too. They had a couple of horses, and they raised rabbits for food. That's all I can think of, of the elderly homesteaders there.

Gary: Did you know many of the people on the other side of the river?

George: Yes. I knew Madge [Terrian] who had the homestead almost on the border. She'd had three or four husbands, but the last husband came down in the middle of winter, snowshoed down. He was a French Canadian, a beaver trapper. Of course, I knew Loyd and Ruth Sondreson quite well. When we would get snowed in in the winter time Dad had a small Ford tractor, but when the snow dripped in so he couldn't push it with his small tractor Loyd and Ruth would come over. Loyd would plow the road and widen it a lot from our place down to the ranger station. That would usually be at the end of February, then my dad would then be able to keep it open again with the Ford tractor. I just briefly knew the acquaintance of a number of the residents, but the names I can't recall off the top of my head.

Gary: What was daily life like and how was it different from life in most parts of the country?

George: All I can think of that is that the families that lived up here just worked from dawn until dark, summer and winter. They didn't have as much relaxing time as people have up here now.

Jan: Did most of them raise cattle or other animals?

George: Yes. A lot of them raised their cattle, and a lot of them had big gardens, and they worked awfully hard on their gardens.

Gary: You said you were snowed in. You must have homeschooled up here?

George: Yes.

Gary: From what grades?

George: One thing I recall is that my mother actually had a teaching credential, but she just really hated the homeschooling. That's all I have to say on it.

Gary: Okay. [Laughing] Tell us about the North Fork social life.

George: Dad thought that people needed to get together more, so he and a number of people organized the North Fork Improvement Association (NFIA). They would meet once a month at our place in the summer time. My dad was the first president, and Walt Hammer was the second president they had. Then after the meeting they would have a square dance. They had a man and his wife called [Hubert] Hunt. Hunt played the violin and his wife played the piano, and a third man would call the square dances. Often they would break at midnight to eat and then go on until about half past one in the morning. After a number of years they built a community hall that Larry Wilson doesn't talk about his column. But where Sondreson Hall is, that land was donated. Madge donated the land for the hall, and then they would alternate. Most of the meetings were held over there. Then in the summertime we would have square dances over there and in the alternate week they would have the square dances at our place.

Gary: At the Quarter Circle MC Guest Ranch. I remember.

George: Some of the first early dances were held up at Matt Brill's place [Kintla Ranch], after he had sold his lodge up there [to Ross and Louise Wilson]. The original lodge burned down, and Ross rebuilt it.

Gary: Yes, I remember some of the good times myself. Were you a member of any organizations on the North Fork?

George: Well, my parents were, of course, members of the North Fork Improvement Association.

Jan: What were the modes of transportation in the North Fork, and what was the North Fork Road like?

George: What people don't realize today is that the old Inside Park Road was the main route up to the North Fork, and that was the route that the mail was designated to come on. Up until about 1958 or so, that was the way that most people drove up, and the Forest Service road was always very rough. A friend of mine remarked that during the mid-1950s there was grass growing in the middle of the road. At some point in the 1950s the Forest Service started to work on the road, and eventually by 1960 they changed the mail contract, to come up from Columbia Falls on that road.

Gary: Did it cross the pole bridge at that time and go up the other side of the river?

George: Yes. When the mail came up the Park side it would cross over the pole bridge and then stop at the store, and of course there was a regular post office at the store. Then it would go on up to Trail Creek. Somebody in the Trail Creek area would take the post office up there. It changed around from the various people.

Gary: How did you communicate with other people on the North Fork?

George: There was a phone from the ranger station at Kintla Lake that ran all the way down for the people at Big Prairie, then went down to the ranger station at Polebridge, and then went on down the Inside Road to the Park headquarters. Then there was a phone line that went down the Forest Service side, and I'm not sure whether it went to Columbia Falls, but it did also come over

to the store, I think, and then came over to the ranger station at Polebridge. So, the ranger station in Polebridge could talk to people on the Forest Service line. I know that phone on the Forest Service side went as far as Walt Hammer's place, and it might have gone even up to Trail Creek. At some point, I think in the 1950s, the Forest Service yanked it out without asking anybody about it.

In the winter time the ranger's wife at the Polebridge Ranger Station would call up my mother when they both were bored, and she would say, "Mary, you want to hear an interesting conversation?" Then she would plug my mother into a conversation going on between two women on the Forest Service side.

Gary: And those were the old Forest Service crank phones.

George: Yes.

Jan: Everybody was on a party line.

George: Yes.

Jan: Do you remember your ring?

George: There were three of us kids in the family and two adults. I'm sure it was pure happenstance, but our ring was two longs and three shorts. The Polebridge Ranger Station was two longs, and they had the two adults there. From Kintla Lake the phone ran all the way up to Numa Lookout, and Scottie Beaton was, as I mentioned, a super alert person. We had a small hot water heater on our place that caught fire one afternoon. We rushed up there to try to put it out, then my dad rushed for the phone to call for the fire engine they had at the ranger station. He picked up the phone and heard Scottie Beaton talking to the ranger. Scottie said, "There's a fire at McFarland's place I think between the 3rd and 4th cabins." So, they got their Dodge World War II surplus fire engine going. The carburetors plugged up, so they could come up at about a mile and a half an hour. Of course, they arrived after he'd had the fire completely out for about half an hour.

Jan: Had the fire out before the truck got here.

George: Yes.

Jan: What did you do for fun?

George: I've been trying to think that over. We had bought a number of World War II life rafts. I think other people in the area did, too, and started to float the North Fork. That was recreation. I remember one time some people had come up from the ranger station, and my dad and them tried to float it in March. They got down about a mile and a half and it was iced up. It was a warm spring day, and they thought it would be open and they could float all the way down to the ranger station. A number of local people took boats up to Bowman Lake and Kintla Lake, small outboard motors. A good lake to fish used to be Quartz Lake. Various people would go in there with us on horseback or hike into there.

Jan: I remember you mentioned earlier that you took people out on horseback when you were here at the dude ranch. After you got done doing that, did you ever just go for a ride on your own and do some exploring?

George: Well, I was personally . . . maybe I'm ahead of my time. I was interested in mountain climbing. The Park, on the east side, had quite extensive mountain climbing, and they had guides in the 1920s at Many Glacier. But when we first came here the Park just didn't want anybody to climb mountains, and they really discouraged it. There was a one ranger-naturalist on the east side who was just a natural born mountain climber, and he began to mimeograph descriptions of how to climb the peaks of the Park. He sent one to every ranger station. Some ranger stations just put his mimeographed booklet in the wastepaper basket, but the local ranger station gave me the mimeograph, so that was my recreation, attempting to climb some of the local mountains here.

Jan: Somebody mentioned to me that you tried, or maybe actually made it, up to Numa Peak up above the lookout. Did you ever go clear to the top?

George: Yes. It's a wild place.

Jan: Do you have any idea about how old you were when you did that?

George: I was probably around 19. By happenstance, on difficult mountains I was able to get somebody who knew a lot more than I did about it. On Numa a friend of a friend came by, and he was the president of the Princeton Mountaineering Club his last year. He was about 6'4" with tremendous arms, and he was a very skilled mountain climber. We had climbed another mountain the year before and had some happenstancial things occur and were only able to get about three-quarters of the way up.

Jan: You also climbed Rainbow Peak, didn't you?

George: Yes. No complications on that peak. There's a number of routes you can take up to the peak there. Everybody tries to find different routes, but probably the best and most direct route is a trail from the lake up on the righthand side of the stream bed. That takes you up quite a ways, but you sort of aim for the saddle between Rainbow and Square Peak. But the steepest of everything is the grass slope that goes up to the saddle there, just the last 500 feet or so of grass, but it's just very steep and there's some locks interspersed with it, but you just want to be very careful. It's just slick bear grass, so you don't want to fall or you go head over heels and hit one of the rocks. You need to be very cautious and plant your feet on the topside of the bear grass there. But it's a long day. For ordinary hikers, you leave the lakeshore at about 5:00 o'clock in the morning, and take a little bit of a rest at the saddle, and then an hour rest on top. But you don't usually get back to the lake until 9:00 or 10:00 o'clock, just at dusk. My advice is to get an early start to leave the foot of the lake at 4:00 o'clock in the morning, so you get up to the streambed that drains Square Peak and Rainbow at 5:00 o'clock in the morning to start going up. Then you also have to be watchful because there's grizzly bears on the face and the backside of Rainbow. Once you leave the saddle between Square Peak and Rainbow, you want to scan the slope constantly for grizzly bears. Some people have gotten within 400 feet of the top and encountered a the grizzly bear and would have to come back down.

Jan: Have to turn around and go back.

George: Yes.

Gary: Can you tell us about any major forest fires, the old forest fires maybe? Floods or ice storms or other major events that you experienced on the North Fork?

George: Well, I was gone when the 1964 flood came. We didn't have any big fires until recent years.

Jan: Did the Red Bench Fire get fairly close to this area on Big Prairie?

George: Yes, it crossed at the south end of the Prairie. I can't remember. I was talking to the local ranger in the 1950s. Those ridges we can see from Big Prairie, there's ridges from Bowman Lake that come down and then ridges from Quartz. I don't think we can quite see it, but ridges come down from Logging Lake. Any lightning fire. We had a lot of dry years with lightning but no rain. In the last three years, 2009-10-11, we've had lightning storms with lots and lots of rain. But back in the early 1950s we had so many dry lightning storms, but on the ridges it's very hard to get to where the lightening fires were, so they would drop smokejumpers in so every single fire that occurred was ruthlessly suppressed. Right from where we can see on Big Prairie, I forget exactly the year, but sort of in the 1970s the area was just getting choked with lodgepole, and the trees were getting stressed, and the stressed trees invite the lodgepole beetle to come. Then we could look up on the hillside and see all this brown from all of the lodgepole that had been killed by the beetle. It spread from here and went down to Whitefish and spread to other various places in the Flathead, all coming out of the North Fork area here. When the Red Bench came in 1988 we had a lot of downed beetle killed trees and also standing beetle killed trees. They said when the fire hit those trees and had some wind behind it, it moved at up to 16 miles an hour, which is one of the fastest rates that forest fires have been clocked at.

Gary: What are some of the other events that happened on the North Fork that you remember?

George: You probably recall better than I do all those other fires. There was a Moose Fire and then in much more recent times the Wedge Canyon fire that was very large. But I think long before my time the big fire was in 1929. That started down by Half Moon, a ways north of the Blue Moon Saloon. There's various theories of how that got started, but it blew over to Tea Kettle Mountain and then went up the North Fork almost to the Canadian border, then one arm of it came over Huckleberry Mountain into Apgar and then went down and just bypassed Park headquarters, and then split and one arm of it went up the Middle Fork Canyon and another arm went down towards Hungry Horse and Coram. They said on the North Fork as the fire was coming people dug big holes on their property and buried all their furniture and then got gunny sacks and got in the middle of the river with the gunny sacks over them as the fire went by. But that is just what I've heard from other people. I don't know if you could interview people; I don't know how old they would be by now, but it would be good to get some firsthand interviews or secondhand interviews, because that was the big major event up there. And then the larch; there's all this standing dead larch. Local mills cut that, and it was a premium wood for flooring. When my family was building a house in Whitefish the fire-killed larch was the flooring that everybody wanted to have. There was larch still standing I think up until the 1970s to 1980s here.

Gary: Who were some of the leaders or characters you remember? There were some real characters on the North Fork. Do you remember any of them?

George: No. All that you'll have to get from people on the other side. The North Fork in the 1920s and 1930s had maybe about average for the state at that time, but it just had a lot of people who didn't get along with each other. The superintendent of schools in Whitefish came out from Minnesota as a young man, in 1926 I think. He said he got up to the North Fork in 1929, and there were three people shot in the winter over several month's time. He said the sheriff said there was no way he going to snowshoe up here in the middle of winter, so the county coroner just put in the log book that each of those were justified homicide—that's what he wrote and listed all three names.

Jan: Saved him a long trip coming up here.

George: But that was my dad's feeling, that the North Fork Improvement Association would get people together and talking and bring more harmony to the area. Because we ran a dude ranch we were dependent on our mail. The Secretary of the Dude Ranches Association at Billings would get inquiries for dude ranch vacations in mid-winter, then depending on what type of place they would like he would send inquiries to those ranches that might answer the peoples' questions, so we were really dependent on our mail. The Holcombs, a long-time almost original people on the North Fork, their daughter married a man named Ralph Day, who was one of the laziest people on the earth, and he got the mail contract. To have the mail contract you are required to have a vehicle that would go over the snow.

In the late 1930s a man named [Earl] Ryan had a homestead, and he had a Model T Ford that he put skis on the front and had rigged up tracks on the back. It was a real going snow machine. But when Ralph Day took over the contract, all he had was a jeep. He would try to start up from West Glacier and get bogged down, and then he would say he made an attempt and they would give him pay for the week. My dad would file complaints with the post office department. Half of the people up here wanted the mail, but the other half supported Ralph Day. Finally, they would put pressure on him. One time Loyd Sondreson rigged up a big sled and built sort of a cabin on the sled. Then Ralph Day would bring the mail up with his CAT, and it was pretty expensive to run a CAT all the way to Trail Creek, but they did that under pressure. Nobody had gotten mail for a month or so. We were not in good stead with a number of the North Fork people because of the mail situation, but eventually my dad bought a real small airplane so he could fly into West Glacier and pick up our mail, and occasionally would pick up other peoples' mail locally, too. Then about 1952 we moved down to Arizona for the winter time and would get letters down there saying, "We're up in the North Fork and we're not getting mail. Can you help us with our mail service?"

Gary: Do you remember how you celebrated holidays?

George: Well, the big one was the 4th of July, and the standard was a fish fry. A number of people would go out and catch a lot of fish and would start to fry them up, and they would have a baseball game, and then they would eat the fish and have a square dance. That was always the big thing. A close friend of mine just said it always rained on the 4th and wouldn't last too long. Every 4th of July would have a rain shower.

Jan: In the 4th of July Parade here the last few years you've been in it with your grandkids, haven't you?

George: That's Jack.

Jan: Oh, that's Jack that gets all the kids organized?

George: Yes.

Jan: I've seen them in the parade. That was always kind of fun.

Gary: What were Christmas and Thanksgiving like?

George: Thanksgiving we would invite Scottie over, and then the homesteaders that lived behind the ranger station would come over. I remember one Christmas my parents had ordered presents, and then the mail didn't come. My mother gave my dad a pair of socks he didn't know he owned, and my dad gave her a can of varnish for her snow shoes. [Laughs]

Gary: Tell us about any close encounters you had with wild animals.

George: I did have one close encounter with a grizzly bear on Rainbow Peak. There was a man by the name of Jim Vaughn who was a biologist from Oregon. In 1950 he was hired by the Yukon government to go into an area where white people hadn't much gone into. He found it was very rich in minerals and calcium and things. He found a moose with gigantic horns, and he put together a paperback book. Then he had a movie he toured the country with. My dad was able to see the movie and talk to him and line him up for the ranch in the spring for a couple of days. In the movie he showed how the Indians in that area tracked moose. They'd take the shoulder blade of a moose and rub it against some willows. It sounded like a moose was getting his horns all polished up to fight, and the other moose would come right over and investigate.

I always liked to explore around on foot. One time in the middle of summer I was going back through all this lodgepole, and I looked down and here was a shoulder blade of a moose or an elk. I picked it up and said, "Well, it probably won't make much noise on a jack pine here, so I rubbed it against the jack pine and it made a really amplified sound. I was really surprised. Suddenly I heard something moving, and some big animal came about 50 feet away just charging through all this jack pine. I've never picked up a shoulder blade since. [Laughs]

I had another time just walking back here. All through this country here there's a lot of places where there would be a small creek, then the beaver dammed it up and created a pond, and eventually the beaver would move on and the pond would dry up. Then if it had a lot of trees, there would be dead trees so that the pond was like matchsticks. One time I just walked into one of these dried up ponds and all these windfalls. I started stepping across each one, and about two-thirds of the way across this pond and I stopped and looked up, and here 15 feet in front of me was a cow moose. She just stood there and watched me come up to her, so the only thing I knew to do was turn around and step over all the lodgepole and go back. I have seen some mountain lions, not very often, but once every 5 years or so.

Jan: What's your advice if someone runs into a grizzly? You mentioned up on Rainbow Peak, how did you handle that?

George: Well, that's what the old-time local ranger said. It's a lot of good sense. He said, "If you run into a grizzly, I can't tell you want to do, but if you can come back and tell me the story you did the right thing.

Gary: That's good advice.

George: Well, the thing is whenever you're walking make a lot of noise, then I think bear spray is very important. So many problems about the bear spray, trying to get it out of the holster. You can fire some right on the hip there, but you've got to get the safety off and everything. If I got charged I think I would be all thumbs and never be able to get it out. A number of years ago there was a young woman hiking and got charged by a bear. She got her bear spray out and pulled the trigger, but it was pointed the wrong way and she sprayed herself. She just screamed a huge loud scream, and the grizzly stopped in its tracks and ran off.

The first and foremost thing that's very hard to get across to people, if you have a camera forget about it. Do not try to attempt to take a picture. When you meet up with a grizzly you want to communicate to the grizzly that you don't mean harm, and you need a lot of unconscious things deep in your psyche to try to communicate this. The camera will just get you into trouble and not communicate this. We have the problem with hiking along if we don't make noise, and we met a mother grizzly with young, they're afraid of getting attacked by a male grizzly which will try to kill the young. So, they are very alert for anything that's trying to sneak up on them, and then usually they come unglued. But the male grizzlies, it's also deep in their genes that anything that's sneaking up on them is bad news. And we walk along upright. Grizzlies stand up a lot to get a better view, but standing upright in grizzly language is aggressive posturing. And then we've got a backpack on our back, which the grizzly interprets as hair standing up on our back, which is another aggressive posturing. And then we stare at them, which is also aggressiveness in bear language, and then we bring up the big lens, the big eye and point it at them, and that's being super aggressive. So. we communicate all the wrong things when we meet the bear.

With grizzlies, if everything else goes wrong you can just play dead. Some of the manuals say to interlace your fingers over your neck, but if you play guitar you want to protect your guitar fingers. But you want to be sure it's a grizzly, because you definitely do not play dead with a mountain lion or a black bear, so that's a problem there. But the grizzly thinks we are a member of the grizzly clan, so if you play dead it's an unwritten thing of animal clans you don't maim or kill a member of your own species, so they will just give us a couple of bites to put us out of commission and usually don't go in too far, an inch or an inch and a half. They could snap off a whole leg or whole arm without anything, but that's just something that they don't do, so make sure it's a grizzly and play dead. Very, very definitely do not try to climb a tree. Our local ranger Jerry DeSanto was pulled out of a tree. Breaking off the limbs is a very aggressive sound in grizzly language. The adult grizzly can't climb trees, but they haven't read the wildlife manual, so they can come right up a tree after you. They're not supposed to be able to do it, but if they can get up the tree fast they can reach up and yank you out of the tree. The biggest thing is just making noise and not taking bears by surprise.

Gary: That sounds like really good advice, George. Believe it or not we're down to our last question. What kinds of changes have you seen over time?

George: Well, here in the Park halfway on the road to Kintla Lake I've seen just a new type of driver, of driving small cars very aggressively. I've talked to a local ranger about it, and I asked, "Is it my imagination that people are driving aggressively in the last couple of years?" He said, "No, it's not your imagination." The maintenance man who collects the garbage from Bowman Lake and Kintla Lake used to have a two-wheel drive pick-up with a long bed. Every spring the Park ordered a whole fleet of new pick-up trucks, and depending what you do you can pick out the pick-up truck that you need. It's probably been four or five years now, but I've met the maintenance way on his way up to Kintla Lake, and I just started staring at his pick-up truck. He had a short bed, and all the garbage he has to pick up at Kintla there just didn't seem to be the space for it. Then he saw me staring at the short bed, and he turned to me and said, "I know it's short, but I can dodge these people a lot better with this truck."

In real tight corners downhill I've had cars trying to pass me coming the other way. I just get mad, and once I held out my hand and got them to stop, and I said, "You just need to go slow here," and they just exploded at me. They said, "I know this road; I've been driving this for years. I know how to drive!" Always always always meeting Park trucks, forever and ever. They just basically drive too fast. The National Park Service, of all the government departments, is supposed to have the worst record for driving and accidents. The trucks used to be orange, and then they painted them green and you couldn't see them. Thank goodness, they're going back to orange again.

Jan: Oh, they are?

George: Yes. For a couple of years I was gone, bouncing around the country working in other places, and I left my pick-up truck here. Mother was taking some friends up to Bowman Lake for a picnic. When I got back the next spring she said, "George, there's some scratches on your pick-up truck." It turned out that the maintenance man, who is actually a good friend of my mother's, they met him coming down the Bowman Lake Road as they were going up. He was driving the big garbage truck, so my mother pulled off and stopped, and he tried to pass her, but he missed. He touched it and put two dents, big long scratches across the door. Then he got wedged in and had to back up, then he put two higher scratches across the door. But I thought it was humorous. He was a real nice man and a good friend.

Just two years ago I was between the ranger station and Bowman Lake bridge and met a big huge gravel truck. I had pulled off, and it was just crossing the bridge and was trying to roar past me. I got my hand out and got him stopped, and I said, "You need to go slow. 50 years of bad driving on this road!" I was so mad I filed a complaint with the ranger. But this year they've been doing a lot of work on Bowman Road, particular up towards Kintla, and when you meet one of the big gravel trucks they often pull off and stop, and boy that's a real change.

Jan: That's good.

[End of recording]