

JOE LANG ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

June 19, 2015

This is Debo Powers, and today is June 19, 2015. I am interviewing for the first time Joe Lang. This interview is taking place at 14000 North Fork Road, Polebridge, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project.

Debo: Joe, tell us a little bit about your early background, where you born and grew up.

Joe: I was born way, way years ago, in 1932, in rural eastern North Carolina, a farming area. When I was in the fourth grade we moved to Florida, and I was really raised in Dade City, Florida. I remained there until one year after I graduated from high school. I decided there was nothing to do around there, I didn't want to go to college and probably couldn't even afford to go to college, so I enlisted in the Air Force. I ended up making it my career. I didn't do any shooting or any fighting. I was the typist. I wound up at Offutt AFB in Omaha, Nebraska, twice. It was during our second tour at Offutt that somehow we heard about Glacier National Park. So, we started coming up here on our summer vacations. Mostly we stayed over on the eastern side, because that's the best side for camping and hiking and so forth. Every summer we would come up for two weeks.

How we found out about the North Fork was, every tourist wants to see a bear. And that was true for us. We wanted to see bears. In fact, a good example, we were camping on the west side. There was a bridge across a little creek, and a sign said "Closed due to bear damage." My kids and my crazy wife said, "Oh, good. Let's go see the bears." They stepped across and ran into a ranger over there. He told us the place to go was the Camas Road. He said when the Camas Road was being upgraded, they made the mistake of seeding clover on each side, and bears love clover. That was a ranger that told us that. I think it was the first time we went up that we saw a bear. We were always coming up to Camas. We would wind up at the end of Camas, and there's that dirty road you look at. We didn't know about it at the time, but the first time we were sitting there debating a log truck came roaring down and the dust was flying everywhere. I said to my wife, "No way." So, we turned around and came back.

We never did, on any of our vacations up here, go up the North Fork Road. But after four or five summers like that, we decided yes, that would be a nice place to have a summer home, because by then I was retired from the Air Force. We contacted a realtor, and he sent us a real estate magazine for Flathead County. We subscribed to the *Hungry Horse News*. We were looking at Larry Wilson's column—you always had to do that. We saw a place in the newspaper for sale. It was Monty Benson's home. We wrote back and forth, and he was giving us detailed information. He sent us 35 or 40 pictures. I sent him questions with room after each question to respond. We wound up buying the place, and we never did see it before buying it. We were going to come up during a school break at the end of winter. Joan and I were going to make a quick dash up here to look at it before committing ourselves, but we had a snow storm and couldn't make it. We said it looked so nice, and it was what we'd always thought about, so we bought it sight unseen, and we never regretted it once.

Joan retired from the schools in 1991, and that's when we were packing up and getting ready to come the day after school ended.

Debo: What year did you buy your property?

Joe: It was either late winter or early spring of 1991. It was Maggie, who was in junior high school at the time, our son Steve who is with me now, and Joan and myself. I was driving a U-Haul trailer, and they were following me in the motor home we had at the time. We wound up here. We had to go up the North Fork Road finally. The Bensons had told us where to meet them, which was at the father Jack Benson's place down at Steve Berg's. We stopped there, and Jack came out and we introduced ourselves. We talked for a little bit; we had questions for him. Then he told us a funny story. He said, "My boys thought they were going to pull a joke on you. They were going to take you up Trail Creek Road and show you a dilapidated house and say that's what you bought." Jack told them, "You'd better not do that, because you don't know this guy." I'm thankful that he did, because I would have had a heart attack.

I was only about 44 or 45 at the time. I wanted something to do. I told my wife, "I'm too young to totally stop. I've got to find something to do." Well, during all of the summers of coming up, we got to know Becky [Hardey], the mail gal, real well. On her way back down, she would stop and have lunch with us. She told me about a vacancy coming up at the Custom's station at Trail Creek. I went over to introduce myself at Roosville, to the area director. I told them I was retired Air Force. He said, "Oh, I had a tour in the Air Force, too," so we had a little connection there. We talked for about half an hour, and he gave me the forms to fill out. They had to check me out and all that, but I got the job.



Joe Lang served as U.S. Customs agent at the Canadian border from 1991-1995.

Debo: What was your job?

Joe: There was only one inspector here. It was only open June 1 through the end of October. We would open at 9:00, and we closed the gates at 5:00. When we first opened up, at the start of June we'd be happy if we'd see six or seven people a day. That's when I learned

to play cribbage. The Canadians love to play crib. We never peaked over 20 people in a day, and that was seldom. The Canadian guy at that time as a retired RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police]. At that time the place was crawling all over with animal study kids. It's like every animal had a group that was studying it. We got to be quite friendly with them, because animals don't have to go through Customs. They can go through the gate anytime, so had special dealings with them.

Debo: When you first started living up here, what was it like? Did you have water?

Joe: When we were just coming up summers, there was no water. We would have to go down to the Trail Creek bridge and then parallel the road and back up. We would carry about a 500-gallon drum on the back of the pickup truck. The house was plumbed, ready for water, and upstairs it had a giant tank. We'd pump the water up there, and it was gravity fed. We had that for two or three years. We wanted our own well. Everybody wants their own well. We tried, but came up with two dry holes. Jack Benson owed Ed Heger's place. In fact, Wayne built that. The three of us decided we would go for a well together. We brought in a dowser, a witcher, and wherever she said to dig we would dig. Then the well would belong to all of us in thirds. Steve Berg drew up the paperwork. Wayne brought up a dowser. At first she tried around here, but couldn't find anything. She started going down the side of our trail—nothing. She got to the middle house—nothing. At Heger's place it went down on her, and that's where we drilled. It was well over 100 feet, and we were getting something like 20-25 gallons a minute. But with a community well and the way everything was built, you couldn't have a pressure system. That was impossible. At least we didn't have to go to Trail Creek anymore. All I would do is go down and start the pump, and Joan would tell me when the tank upstairs was full. She would go out on the front porch and start waving a towel, and I could see it, and I knew to turn the pump off.

Debo: That's great.

Joe: People up at the border, the retired RCMP was a very nice guy. He was ideal to have up here. He didn't know it at the time, but he had a heart attack while he was out here. He just recognized it as something being wrong. In their quarters, the couch in the front room would look right down onto the North Fork Road in the States. He would lay on that couch, eat an aspirin, and if he saw a car coming he would go out, probably halfway clear it, and go back and get on the couch. He was that way for three days. When he went out for his relief, they discovered the heart attack, and he never came back.

The relationship between the two, I guess you would call it international relations at its lowest point. Two people. If I needed something, like a nail, I'd run to Canada and get myself a nail. If he was inspecting someone, and it didn't quite look right, I'd just walk over and be there, and he'd do the same for me, so we had a little backup.

Debo: Weren't there a lot of people living at Moose City at the time?

Joe: Some of the animal people were living at Moose City. But when the owners would come in and the summer people would come, they would have to move out. One of the owners, it seemed like every morning she would come over and bring me a breakfast plate. I don't know who she was. But I had already eaten before leaving my house.



Customs and Immigration checkpoint at the Canadian border in 1988

Debo: Do you have any exciting stories from the border?

Joe: One, you know the strict control of weapons in Canada. They are very, very strict. A pickup truck with a beautiful canoe on the back, with Kentucky plates, went into Canada. During the quizzing he asked, "Do you have a hand gun?" It was a man and his wife. "No, I don't have anything like that." Well, Bill was checking around, and he found some hand gun bullets in the glove compartment. So, he was really looking, and he found it. It was one the old-timey revolvers that the guy said had been in his family for years. He also told Bill, "Just before I left, I was giving my kids a lecture on how you should always tell the truth." But that didn't save him. If you say yes, you do, you're just turned around. But if not, and they find it, I don't know about now, but at the time the fine was \$300, you paid on the spot, plus you lost the weapon. After Bill finished the processing, he got on the radio phone and told me they were coming back. Once they stopped at my canopy, I had to go out, and he told me what had happened. He said, "I don't have enough money to go home now. I've got to go down to the valley and sell this canoe." Later on, over coffee, I told Bill that story. "Joe," he said, "I bet you could have gotten a good deal on that canoe." I said, "I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole."

There was another one. We opened at 9:00, and you know where our cabin is from the border. I would have my breakfast and get up there about 8:30. I'd open and put the flags up and go on the radio to Roosville to say, "We're here." I was driving up one morning, and there was a pickup truck waiting to go into Canada. He was pulling an RV trailer, and there was a dog in the back of the pickup truck. You'd see that every now and then, someone would be waiting. I was outside raising the flags, and he got out of his pickup truck and said, "Good morning." I said, "Good morning." He said, "I'm a secret agent. I can't prove it; I don't have my ID, but I'm a secret agent on a secret mission." I said, "Okay." He kept repeating himself like that. I got the flags up, and I went inside and got on the radio. It was handsets between us and the RCMP. I said, "You've got a kook

coming over.” He said, “Well, let me see what he’s like.” He couldn’t clear him, because he didn’t have the proper vet shots on the dog. So, he parked the trailer on our side, went back down in the valley with his dog. The next morning, he was back and had the shots, so he and his trailer took off. At that time, all the kids with the grizzly bears were located just on the other side of the border. After two or three days they came down to tell Ron, “There’s a trailer sitting on the side of the road up here. There’s a dog chained to the rear end, and it’s been there for two days or so and nobody’s been around.” They’d been feeding and watering the dog. Ron got concerned about what happened to the guy. He called the RCMP, and they were out checking. Couldn’t find him. I don’t remember the time element now, but Ron was inside early one morning to start a new day and he looked up, and here was the guy with just his pickup truck and his dog, waiting to come back into the States. Ron asked, “Where in the hell have you been?” “I was captured, but I escaped. Go get your gun, and we’ll go back and get them.” He let him in, but Ron said, “I’ll be damned if he’s coming back in this country.” The next day or the day after, he wanted to go up and get his trailer. Ron wouldn’t let him in, so it was Lynn Ogle and Larry Wilson who went over and pulled his trailer down for him. In fact, they knew who he was. He was a local somewhere down here.

I never ran into anyone who was running guns or drugs. It was always families. There was one car. We closed at 5:00, and he came down about 4:40. You’re instructed to watch out for people who are wanting to clear just before change of shift, because they want you to halfway look them over and push them right through. Or early in the morning, but we opened at 9:00, so we didn’t worry about that. I was checking this guy out, and I opened his trunk. It was like a drugstore in the trunk of that car. Bottles of all sorts of stuff. We had the tester to see if they were drugs, but I thought, “I’m going to be here until midnight testing all of these.” I called Ron and asked him to come over. He had been years and year on drug enforcement in Canada for the RCMP. I said, “Help me out here, Ron.” He’d take a bottle and smell it. “That’s okay.” “Where did you get this? What’s it for?” But he told me, “There’s nothing there.” That’s the only time I really had a problem.

I have to tell you one more. After Ron had his heart attack, the main guy who finally came out and was the steady one was Bill McSevnee. He was about 6’6”, Scottish, red hair, red mustache. He was single. A lot of times, after we’d close, he’d have his dinner and we’d have our dinner, then he’d get on his motorcycle and come down, and we’d watch a movie at my place. We were watching a movie, and it was getting dark, but you could still see things around. We were really concentrating on a good movie, and someone came knocking on our back door. I went out, and it was a man and his son on bicycles. They asked, “Do you have a telephone?” I said no. He said, “I need a telephone to call down valley.” I asked, “Who are you? Where did you come from?” He said, “I came from Canada.” I said, “Well, you stopped at the wrong house.” I said, “Bill, come out here.” It turned out they had driven from the east side into Canada. They were Americans. They took a long bike ride, and the mother came down from the other side, and they were to meet in Glacier Park. After questioning him and checking out his ID, I called Roosville and explained it to them. They said, “Well, use your own judgment.” He had a kid with him, and it looked right. Pretty soon my radio came alive. It was a ranger down in the Park. He said he had a woman there looking for her husband and little boy.

So, I figured it was okay. But I told them, “If you’d run into someone who said you’d interrupted his movie, you could have been heavily fined.”

Debo: So, there weren’t that many people who went across the border.

Joe: That’s true. It was so seldom.

Debo: Were you there until they closed the border?

Joe: You know about the big flood?

Debo: Well, tell me about the flood.

Joe: That was the year that I had stopped working the border, because I knew we were going back to Florida. There was a guy from Roosville who came over to start that year. This was in 1995. But I had a rain gauge in my yard, and it would measure 10 inches. That night it rained and it rained, it was just pouring. After breakfast I went and looked, and the rain gauge had overflowed.

Debo: That doesn’t happen up here very often.

Joe: That’s true. Somebody, I don’t remember who now, came by and said, “They want you to come on up to the border to see what’s going on.” I guess just to show me. I took my video camera with me. You know what it’s like on our side. There’s the canopy you drive under. That was under water. The water was all across the road, so far up but not to the Canadian buildings. Then all over into the airfield area and all. We were walking over where the water ends, into Moose City, and you could see the results of where one of the buildings stood. It had already gone down the river, and there was another one about to go. I was recording it and watching it as it went down the river. There were a boy and a girl who were on their way the night before, before the gates closed. They were on their way going north. They went so far, and they couldn’t get through because of the water and had come back and spent the night with the Canadians. Naturally, everything was closed. I can’t remember how many days it took. When you finally could go across, and Big Bill was on the other side, I went over to see him, over by where Joe Bush’s place was. That’s where the road had been cut by the water from the river. There was a partial bridge up until that time, which was useful, but it was gone. You could see from the water mark where it had been at Joe Bush’s quarters. There was mud everywhere. I have heard—I don’t whether it’s true or not—that shortly after that the U.S. was ready to open the border anytime the Canadians would open, but the Canadians didn’t have any reason. The road had been washed out. The only reason would be if it was like the first year we were here, when there were 12-15 log trucks coming down every day. You don’t see that anymore. I have seen in the paper where there are organizations in the Canada that went to expand Waterton Park west to the river. If that happens, that’s a reason to open the road.

Debo: That was the year that they closed the road, the year of the flood?

Joe: It’s never been opened since.

Debo: It was nice when we could drive across there and go to Fernie.

Joe: Back when it was open, you had locals here who would drive up and have lunch at Joe's place. You had the tourists that would come up and go across, just to get their picture taken so they could say they went to Canada. The Sullivans [Don and Sue] had Tom Reynolds' place. They treated him just like he was family. When you look at the tape that I brought, you'll see that Sue is doing some of the interviewing. Becky Green [later Hardey] would pick him up and bring him up to the border. Joan would be up there, and Sue would be up. They would ply him with questions to get him to talk. You'll see a Canadian in his uniform, with a beard. That's not Ron; that's the guy who came out when he had his heart attack, until the new guy could come. But he seemed to know a lot of what Tom was talking about.

I had another crazy incident. A girl was coming up from the States on her bicycle. She looked to be in her late teens. She had black garbage bags. One was tied to her handle bars. Bill was talking to her and came back on the radio and said, "She's missing 60 cents of her dollar. I can't let her in." When she came back and I was talking to her, I tried to ask her her name. She said, "I don't have to tell you my name." I said, "That's right. But suppose someone is looking for you, and I hear the name but I don't know it's you. Why don't you tell me for that reason?" She said no. I asked, "Where are you from?" She said, "I don't have to tell you anything." I got on the radio and called the sheriff's office. I explained it to them, and they asked, "Do you consider her a threat?" I said, "I don't think so." He said, "Well, it's not against the law to be crazy." So, she biked down the river access across from the border and was there a long, long time. I was waiting for her to come back out. I wondered if she had jumped in the river. Finally, I walked down there, and she was just sitting there, leaning up against a tree and watching the water. Finally, she came out and started biking south.



Friends Ray Brown (left) and Joe Bush (right) help Tom Reynolds celebrate his 95th birthday at Joe's place on the border in 1991.

We would have great parties with the animal study people. Sometimes at our place, and sometimes over in Canada. They enjoyed it, because it was a way to have a good meal. We enjoyed it, because they could tell such great stories.

Debo: Did you have any encounters with animals?

Joe: Not me, personally. You can't see our lane from our place, the way it's grown up, but it comes off the North Fork Road, and it goes a ways and then splits, going to the middle house and then on up to our house. From our cabin all the way down to the road was about a quarter of a mile. We had a Chesapeake Bay retriever at the time. Joan was going down to put letters in the mailbox, but she always had him on a leash. She was walking halfway down one day and looked up, about 20-25 feet in front of her was an adult grizzly, eating grass. The wind had to have been in the wrong direction, because he didn't smell her. But then he looked up, and he reared up. She was so excited, she had to run back and tell me. She was a diehard animal lover. She said, "The only thing I could think of was 'Oh, you beautiful thing, you.'" He turned around and walked off.

I have to tell you a little more about what you're going to see on the tape of Tom Reynolds. Every time we would meet anyplace, at our house or the border or anywhere, we'd eat, and then start quizzing him with Joan recording. What you have is, I tried to find some sort of chronological way of keeping it the way he lived. There's a minute you'll see, in the Customs building; the next minute it's in our house; back and forth, just to keep it going right. I watched it again this morning. One thing, I should have ended it differently, with a different story. I don't know if you've heard this or not. Tom couldn't have lived up here without Becky. Have you heard that?



Joan Lang with Don Sullivan's uncle

Debo: I know she dropped in on him a lot.

Joe: Don and Sue took excellent care of him, but at that time their winters were back in Illinois. They would send him things. I remember once they mailed him a big, new blanket. Actually, they mailed it to John Frederick, and John then took it up to him. Winters were with us in Columbia Falls. Joan would make a giant bowl of potato soup. She would fill a big jar, close it, and give it to Becky at the post office the next morning, and she'd take it up to Tom. At first, Tom would meet Becky down at the road most of

the time, and he was always getting a lot of stuff. If it was too much for him to carry, she would take half the load and walk up. Then when he got too sick, if there was anything heavy, she'd just automatically take it up for him. Have you heard the story about how he died?

Debo: Tell the story.



Becky Green and Joe Lang with Tom Reynolds at his 95th birthday party.

Joe: It was twice a week for the mail. One day Becky went up, because she didn't see him down at the road or maybe she'd been going up to his place. I don't know. On this one day, he wasn't down, so she walked up with his mail. She opened the door, and the minute she opened the door it was cold. There was no heat in there. She knew something was wrong, and she could hear him breathing heavily in his bedroom. She walked back and cradled him into her arms, and he died in her arms. We all say, "He was waiting for his Becky." She read a scripture over him, then she finished and went down to Polebridge and called it in. Lynn was one of the people who went up to bring him down valley.

His best friend was Joe Bush. My first day on the border, the area guy was there to teach me. Joe Bush was waiting on the other side to get over. I didn't know who he was, but the area director said, "That's Joe Bush, he lives blah blah blah." It was 9:00, so I opened the gate, and Joe drove under the canopy. I said, "Hello, Joe. I'm Joe. Do you play crib?" But Becky, in those days, when Joe was open would go up to Joe's place and have lunch with him. Then some days she would pick Tom up, and the two of them would go up and have lunch with Joe. Well, Joe used to get *Playboy* magazine, and afterward he would give it to Tom. I could tell when they were coming back and I would go outside, Tom was trying to hide his *Playboy*.

When Joe died, they scattered his ashes up on some hill. A lot of people were there. When Tom heard that he'd died and they were going to have a little ceremony, he said, "The best thing you can do is just pour a can of beer over his ashes." So, when Joan went to pick him up, he was walking out with a six-pack of beer. They went up and everyone had a free hand to say what they wanted and all. When it got to Tom, he just went out

and, can by can, he poured the beer over Tom's ashes. As Joan was telling me later, people were getting a little shook seeing that. But then, you'll see in his tape, when he has a shirt on, his top bottom is always buttoned. I don't think I ever saw him in a tie. Maybe the time we had his birthday up on the border, but I don't remember that. You know how North Fork people are. They don't dress up to go to something like that. Nobody does, but Tom noticed it, because when they were done and were down at Joe's restaurant, with everyone eating, Tom was sitting next to Joan and he said, "You know, if I was to come to something like this dressed like these people are, they'd say, 'This old man doesn't know how to take care of himself.'"

Debo: So, what was Joe Bush like?

Joe: I've heard his real name, but Joe Bush meant, "Joe, he's out in the bush." That wasn't his real name. He was a nice guy, but he was still strange. Like after duty hours he'd say, "Come up and have a beer." We'd go up, and we thought he'd be giving us a beer. But then he'd charge us for it. Stuff like that. He had a daughter, and after he died she took over. She was nice. Joe had special permission, when the gates were closed for the season, to keep his car over on the U.S. side and drive down to do his shopping. But he was always supposed to telephone and let us know that he was down. Sometimes he'd call, and sometimes he wouldn't. He'd always go back drinking too much. One time he parked his car and walked on the other side of the border, and he said his dog was out. He didn't know he'd left his dog out. But his dog was inside. He went inside and said he didn't know what animal was following him around out there. He was crazy like that. I have heard—I don't know if it's true or not—back in those days the wolf was an endangered species. I have heard the story that someone on the U.S. side had killed a wolf and talked Joe into taking blame for it, because Joe wasn't an American.

Debo: How about some of the other characters of the North Fork?

Joe: You know, there are a lot more people here now. In fact, I'm surprised at the number of names. I Google up the area—pictures, I don't recognize anybody. All those names are strangers to me. But in those days, Barbara Lawrence, she was a little strange in some ways. Maggie loved horses; she was crazy about horses. Barbara once told her to come on down, "You can ride our horses." Maggie went down, and she put her to work cleaning her house.

Debo: She never got to ride the horses?

Joe: No. We finally bought her a horse Becky the mail gal was a horse rider, too. We bought one for Maggie, and Becky would trailer hers up, and the two of them would go out roaming all over. Elmer Benson. I've heard how sick he is right now. In fact, Bonny Ogle was telling me it's doubtful that this time next year he'll still be here. Everything Maggie found out about horses, what to do and how to do it, came from Elmer. Elmer was a great, great guy. There was another guy, one of the carpenters up here that built houses. Not Ray Brown, but I can't think of his name. He had relations back in Omaha who owned a bakery. He seemed like he would always come up just when it was time to eat. But he wouldn't eat with us. You don't feel right eating and talking to somebody, but he was always sitting there, and he would talk so slow.

Debo: What kind of changes have you seen in the North Fork?

Joe: The road is a lot better. It seems to be wider. My son Steve, this is the first time he's been up here in 25 years. His comment was, "O Lord, this road." I said, "This is a good road." It's really the same. I'm not thinking of the people and all. You see more lanes, as I said, but the views are still as beautiful as they were back then. The weather is basically the same as it was. Oh, the weather. I thought we had bad weather in Omaha. When we came up year-round, we closed the border and we were down in Columbia Falls for the winter. December and the first two weeks of January, six weeks, 72 inches of snow. I'd never so much snow in all my life.

Debo: And that was in Columbia Falls, not up here.

Joe: Yes. I don't know what they had up here. We were good friends with the Rygiels [John and Mary Louise], which is the next place down, because they were from Florida. Not originally, but for years and year. He retired in the St. Petersburg area. We would come up and have dinner. If it was a nice day with snow on the ground and nothing was anticipated for the next 24 hours, we'd come up and spend the day with them. There was the retired postmaster down in Columbia Falls, Ted and Marian Andrew. We met them through the Rygiels, because they got to be good friends. We were the three couples that were always doing things together in the wintertime.

Debo: How many years were you up here year-round?

Joe: Joan retired in 1991, and we returned to Omaha in 1997. So, from 1991 to 1997. I was the one who talked her into going back. She did not want to leave. She loved this place. I wanted to get back next to the grandkids and the kids. When she finally consented, she said, "Only under one condition. I don't want to go down there and sit and die. I want to travel." Well, we traveled. A good example, we were on the outskirts of Vancouver, British Columbia. About six weeks later, we'd be down in Homestead National Park in South Florida.

Debo: What's it like for you, coming back to the North Fork after all these years?

Joe: Regretting that I left. The best years of our life were in the North Fork. I don't know how it is now, but back then for the landowners there were two groups. You were kind of divided in this little debate that was going on. I was talking to Larry Wilson the other day. He was saying, "I miss Joan and her debates," but we were still friends. I don't miss that, because I like to be friends with everybody and enjoy everybody. My VCR camera was everywhere for all those years. When I got down there I needed something to do, so I converted them all and put them on DVDs. I can sit back and enjoy those years all over again, and I do that quite frequently.

Debo: Well, I think we've about covered most of everything. Thank you so much for this time, on behalf of the North Fork Landowners Association and the North Fork History Project.