

John Frederick Oral History Interview

October 13, 2011

Debo: My name is Debo Powers and today is October 13, 2011. I'm interviewing for the first time John Frederick, Jr. This interview is taking place at 25 Beaver Drive in Polebridge, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So John, tell us a little bit about your early background, like where you were born, when you were born.

John: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, almost in a taxi [May 22, 1943]. I don't think my dad was calm enough to drive. He probably took a taxi. In fact, my mother said they pushed me back in before the doctor got there. She said she was big as a barrel. This was in Columbus, Ohio, and then I spent all my normal schooling in Marion, Ohio, and at Ohio State University. I worked for a social service organization. I was the camp caretaker, went out and fixed things that didn't work. It was an old camp, like the 1930s.

Debo: That's great.



John was born in Ohio in 1943, the first child of John and Betty Frederick.

John: And then I met my future wife [Sue Kates]. We made a visit out west and went to Glacier Park. I had never been to Glacier Park, and then the next year we moved here.

Debo: What year was that?

John: It would have to be 1975 was the trip, and then in 1976 I came back, but not up here on the North Fork quite yet. I needed to find a place to live, and so I found a cheap \$50 a month place where the roof leaked, but it was cheap. I had to go to Eureka to get the electricity turned on. Anyway, it was just a base, and then I had a catalog. I can't remember the name of the company, but they used to have a catalog of the whole entire U.S. I found a property that interested me. It's what I call the Loon House up north that belongs to Doug Barnes. I looked at it, and then I found out my wife wanted to have a hostel. She had [lived in] them for four years off and on, and so I came back and saw this funky, ugly place, a big log cabin with the front porch. There was a porch to stand on, but it was just like a few logs sticking out. It was an

unfinished porch. I said, "God, that place is ugly." I drove up, said "That's ugly!" then turned around and left. Then later I thought about it and thought yeah, maybe I could do something with it, and bought the place Halloween in 1978.



John served in the U.S. Army from 1966-1969. His final assignment was in Alaska, where he later operated a coffee shop, Klondike Kate's, in Anchorage. In late 1970, he graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in English.

Debo: Where was that cabin?

John: That was the [North Fork] Hostel.

Debo: The building was there already?

John: Yes, it was there. I've never built anything new. I've always taken a place and done something to it.

Debo: What was it before you got it?

John: The fellow [Wally Nolan] had like five [six] kids. You know, the kitchen is rather small, maybe 15' x 25'. They lived, all of them, one winter in the attic, which is not an attic, it's just like a crawl space, above the kitchen. I don't know how they did it, but they did it. I know they did it, because I had to change the insulation from under the roof to the kitchen ceiling above. Anyway, he had a lot of kids. He was a house mover, and he moved it there. [Wally was married to Ted and Esther Ross's daughter.]

Debo: Where did it come from, do you know?

John: Glacier Park. It was on the McFarland Ranch [the Quarter Circle MC Ranch].

Debo: What are some of your earliest memories of the North Fork, John?

John: Kind of an odd one. It was winter time, and I had been at the Hostel for a few days. I washed some clothes. I had a pair of red long johns, a union suit, hanging in front of the stove, and I had kind of a welcome wagon visit from Frank Evans. He came over and just welcomed me there, and we talked for a bit. It was just kind of interesting. He was quite a character.

Debo: He was.

John: He's hard to explain to other people, but . . .

Debo: So, he was one of the first people you met up here?



In 1975, John traveled back to Alaska with Sue Kates. They visited Glacier Park on the way home to Ohio. In 1976, they married and moved to Montana permanently.

John: Yes, he was.

Debo: What was the North Fork like in the late 1970s? That was quite a while ago.

John: Actually, I'll have to jump to the 1980s a little bit, because I don't remember, but in those days if you wanted to see somebody you went over and visited. Unlike now, when some of us can e-mail each other, or we've got a radio or we can call each other. Either you went that way, or you don't see your neighbors. There was a distinct difference at that time, because I moved here in 1980 full-time. That first summer of 1979 was just a summer staying for a few months, then I closed and started up in 1980 and just consecutively since then.

But what was interesting is back then, until about 1995 or so, we had a post office, and that was another way we met people, because we would go to the post office, which was in the Polebridge Mercantile, and kind of hang out a little bit, read our mail and meet all our neighbors there and have a little talk with them, "Whatcha been doing?" and so on. That's distinctly gone now. We

don't have that anymore, because people knew about what time the mail went and came and all that, and they would come roughly about half an hour after the mail person was due. We sort of ran into each other.



In October 1978, John and Sue purchased a home that Wally Nolan had fashioned out of buildings he had moved to Polebridge from the former Quarter Circle MC Ranch on Big Prairie. In 1979, they finished converting it into the North Fork Hostel and officially opened for guests in 1980.

The other thing I remember was the road. In the early to mid-1980s I had a Volkswagen square back, which is kind of like a tiny station wagon. I drove it to the border, and there was one big pair of [ruts]. Because the Volkswagen is narrow I could only put one wheel in, and it would be kind of cockeyed, and I drove it like that. It's come a long way. People occasionally still complain about the road. In fact, somebody came to visit somebody today. They went out of Columbia Falls a little ways, and that part hasn't been worked on much. They just turned around and went back, even today. The northern part is quite nice. Clear to the border it's pretty decent.

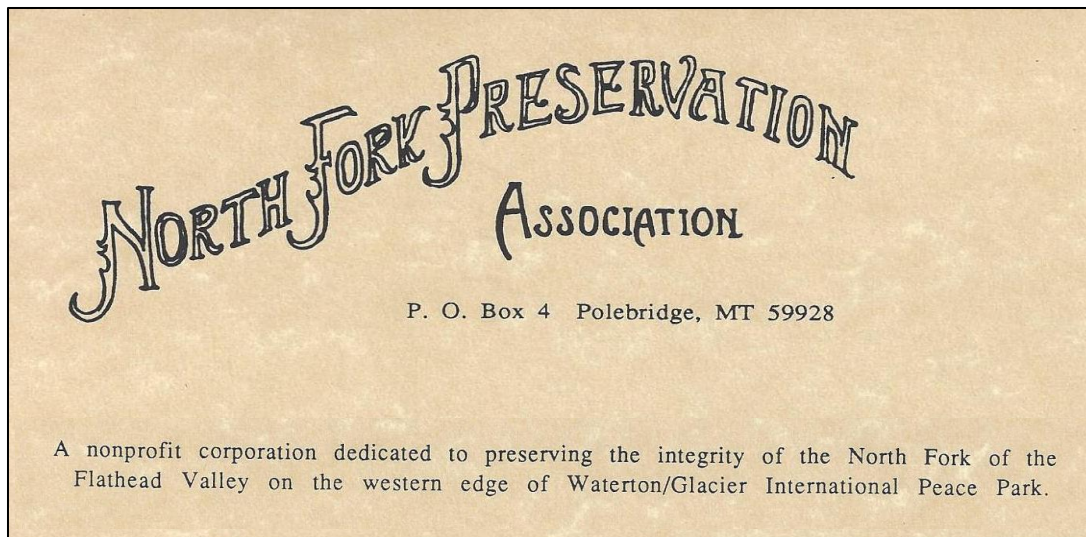
Debo: There have been a lot of struggles about this road over the years, haven't there?

John: Oh yes. That's one of the reasons the North Fork Preservation Association was born—one-half of the reason. The other reason for starting the Preservation Association was the coal mines in Canada. For something like 40 years they were threatening to put coal mines in there, and they would do it in such a way that their tailings pond where they caught everything, there was so much water up there, so much snowfall that it would just blow out. The debris would be in the river. Disregarding the problems of what the silt does to fish breathing, they don't breed well either, because of the change in temperature. It would warm up a little bit, and the temperatures they need for breeding would be not so good.

The road, as we started talking about a minute ago, that was in 1982. Both were in 1982, although the coal mine and the road issue was a lot older than that. The coal mine was first about 1974. It kept reappearing every so often, even until quite recently. But the road was a big one. In a way it's bigger than just something that would largely affect the river, and perhaps a little bit of the air quality from burning coal to wash the coal and that kind of thing.

Debo: So, the Preservation Association basically got started around the issues of the coal mines and not paving the North Fork Road?

John: Yes. The threat to it being paved was in 1982. There was a hearing on St. Patrick's Day in March of 1982, and people showed up in droves. I forget the statistics, but there were a lot more that did not want it paved than wanted it paved. And the road was not exactly favorable to drive on in those days. I'm sure all the tire companies just loved us up here. Sarcastic love, because our tires kept breaking, and we had to take them back and have them give us new ones.



In 1982, John and like-minded North Forkers formed the North Fork Preservation Association to draw attention to threats to water quality in the North Fork of the Flathead River and to campaign to keep the North Fork Road unpaved to stave off unbridled development.

Debo: When you first moved up here, tell me about some of the old-timers who were around in those days. I guess the homesteaders weren't around anymore, but who were some of the people who were still here?

John: About 1984, maybe it was 1982, I met Ralph Thayer. He's the Forest Service guy who laid out those trails that Debo Powers likes to walk.

Debo: Did he really? He's the one that laid out all the trails on the Whitefish Range?

John: Almost all of them. There might have been a few like Indian trails that he just sort of picked up, but I think he was the guy who did it. In fact, the Whitefish Divide Trail is the Ralph Thayer Memorial Trail—Trail 26. I met him, and he was an interesting fellow, a really, really nice guy. I asked him about construction of the Mercantile, because I heard something about him doing what would amount to the rafters in the Merc as you're down below looking up. Or, from above they were floor joists. He said, "Well, if I had an ax I would show you how I did it." Anyway, he was living at the Veteran's Home at that time [in Columbia Falls], and he didn't live a whole lot longer than that.

Debo: Did he build the store?

John: I got the impression he helped a little bit, but I think he built Ford Ranger Station, and his cabin was the that one Nancy Hubble now has, so I assume he did that as well, because in those days there were not too many people who had money to pay somebody like they do now. Either you did it yourself or it didn't happen. [Yes, Nancy Hubble and her husband John bought the old Ralph Thayer homestead, and that was his original homestead cabin. Now owned by Chuck Ludden]

Debo: He was a surveyor, too. Didn't he do a lot of surveys up here?

John: Yes, he surveyed the trails. In those days if they didn't have what they call a boundary tree, they would have a boundary hole. That was kind of an odd marker, 4' x 4' x 4'. There was a hole in the ground on each corner, [and the marker went in the middle of the square.] It would be hard to walk into in the woods, I think. I think it wasn't done too much, but that was one of the things they used if nothing else worked.

I also met Ruth and Loyd Sondreson. When I met Loyd he had lupus, so he couldn't converse very well because he was starting to lose his voice. But Ruth was around a long time until just a few years ago. It was 2011 when she died. This was quite a while before that. In fact, she gave me an old military jeep, and they are really sturdy. I looked at it, and it was all bent and I asked her what happened and she said, "Oh, a couple was spooning and they hit a tree." So that's where the spare parts for my 1941 military jeep came from.

Debo: Anybody else you remember at that time?

John: I mentioned Frank Evans because he wrote for the paper [*Hungry Horse News*], and then I followed him for two years as the North Fork columnist. But with the political situation, I was expendable and they kicked me off and Larry Wilson started writing the column. He was nice about it. He told me it was happening, which is more than the editor did of the *Hungry Horse News*.

Debo: What was the political situation?

John: Tom Ladenburg and another fellow were complaining about me, to the point that they kicked me off the paper, basically.

Debo: Because of your perspective, probably.

John: Well, truly there was nothing in the paper that I wrote that I was aware of. I'm sure there were subtle little things where you could infer something, but I didn't put anything in there deliberately. But it was just you have a reputation, whatever it might be, and people will assume that rather than necessarily what's really happening. It happens all the time.

Debo: Yes, it does. So, when you first moved up to the North Fork it was pretty different from daily life in other places.

John: One big difference now is that I have a solar home. It's wonderful, here in Polebridge. But back then if you wanted water you wore your arm out on a pump, or had a system like I did where you wore your arm out using the pull cord on your generator. You would have a lot of racket because, in my case I filled up a 500 or 600-gallon tank in the Hostel upstairs. Did that if I

was alone once a week or so, but when I had a busy summer it was every day. People don't save much water, unless you live up here. Then you have a tendency to do that more than other places.

Debo: You do. That's true. No telephones, no electricity, no running water, outhouses.

John: Oh yes.

Debo: Old stove, lots of things, huh?

John: I forgot to mention the outhouses. That was a big difference. Some people never quite got on to that, but I had outhouses for 20 years or longer, until I moved into this house.

Debo: Now you've got a solar house and flush toilets and electricity. I do, too.

John: Not necessarily a solar toilet though, a solar outhouse.

Debo: So, tell us about what the social life was like up here in the North Fork.

John: Well, as I was saying earlier you went to someone's house. I went to Frank Vitale and Ellen Horowitz's house about every weekend, and we would make ice cream. We would crank it out. My job was, I got lots of icicles on the Hostel, so I would pull off the icicles and that was the ice for the ice cream maker, which is kind of a bucket with a crank on the side. I would fill it up with ice. I provided the ice cream maker, too, and they provided the rest to make the ice cream. And it was a little more personal in those days. We had one recipe that called for nine eggs. I think now we'd all have real cholesterol problems if we had very much of that.

Debo: Nine eggs in the ice cream, huh?

John: Yes.

Debo: Wasn't there a whole group of people that hung out up there around that neighborhood, like Peter Moore and Greg Ouellette.

John: Peter Moore, and there was a Matt. I forget his last name right now [Isbell]. And from time to time there would be other people up here, too. They would be here for a year or so and disappear, I mean move someplace else. They decided they could do it, but maybe they didn't want to do it because it was kind of rough on the edges, especially in winter. Even now a lot of people live elsewhere in the winter like I do.

Debo: You used to do a lot of hiking up here, too, I remember.

John: I did, just about every popular trail, and some were not even trails. My friend Jack Johns—he was in his 80s, 70-something, like 75 years old or so when I met him. I went hiking with him. There were many trails that we decided to go up. At Akakola, there used to be a lookout up there once upon a time, and we went up there and tried to follow the map. The Forest Service maps in those days were even worse than today. They would have a trail and you couldn't even find it. You couldn't even begin to know where it went, but there was a trail going up, so we decided if we went down that trail it would be a lot better than going up. At least we

would end up in the right place, because you just basically went downhill and you would hit a road, and there was no trail. It was a half a trail, and then went down where there was no trail. We ran into devil's club. That's nasty stuff that's as tall as you are and really had some kind of huge barbs on it. It just made it really hard to kick through that, and so we just went down the creek bottom and left it. That's real interesting. We did the Review Mountain Loop. We went up Tuchuck Creek on the left, and there's a trail going that way. We went up to Review and came back, which is a better way to go, because going the other way you just wonder where the trail went. Going the way I just mentioned you can find your way. Even if you've never been there before you can do it.



In his younger years, John was an avid hiker and backpacker, logging hundreds of miles in the Whitefish Range and Glacier National Park.

Anyway, we did decide to hike. I think it was a Saturday, and on Monday was his 85th birthday and that's when he died. It was one heck of a hike, and he did it. He did just what he loved until almost the last minute, and I respect that.

Debo: I remember hiking with him in the 1980s.

John: I bet you do.

Debo: His Montana Wilderness Association hikes.

John: Yes, I went with him for 10 years or so, and then when I started going to Costa Rica I couldn't get it in my schedule properly. I don't think we had email in the earliest days, at least I didn't, so I kind of had to drop it. They wanted potential hikes much earlier while I was in Costa Rica, and I just couldn't get ahead enough to do it regularly. I remember hiking with you up to Nasukoin. You took your own way and went up real high, and your muscles were shaking.

Debo: A big snowfield was there.

John: You went on the snowfield.

Debo: Yes.

John: I got to hold the pretty French girl's hand and help her across this snowfield while you were up high shaking. You found your way back just fine. We just waited a couple of minutes.

Debo: So, tell me about some of the fires around here that have happened in your lifetime in the North Fork.

John: Well, the biggest one for me personally was the 1988 Red Bench Fire, which was memorable for a number of reasons. The overhead people discovered it about 2:30 in the afternoon. Richard Hildner can tell you a little bit about that. He was the observer with the district ranger Tom Hope, who were both up there looking at this fire. They would call it, "It's a quarter acre, it's a half acre, it's an acre," just like that—boom boom boom. That night they met at the Hostel because it was the biggest place close. Somewhere I've got a picture of the chief fire person for the Park signing over the Park to the Forest Service for purposes of fire suppression. He couldn't find the superintendent that weekend, or whatever it was. He couldn't find him, and he had to do it anyway. He was a bit nervous about that. He had only a year or two left, so he didn't care; he did it and it worked out fine. I think it was the next day that the fire came through Polebridge.



From February 1983 to March 1985, John served as the correspondent for the North Fork, writing a weekly column for the *Hungry Horse News*.

Debo: That fast?

John: It may have been the day after, but it was quick enough. Ron Wilhelm said he was up there with his small CAT helping to see if they couldn't do something to stop the fire from spreading. No, it wasn't that kind of fire. It was one of those where you just get out of the way and hope for the best kind of fires. He said his track vehicle would go seven miles an hour, and that was the speed of the fire. He was right at it; he just stayed ahead of it. He was a very nervous fellow and he also, incidentally, I forgot to mention, was the fellow who was the host for the first meeting of the North Fork Preservation Association when people voted to have it called that. He was the fellow moderating it. He used to be here all the time. Some time ago he moved south to Columbia Falls.

Debo: So, when the fire came into Polebridge I'm sure you were pretty scared that you were going to lose your place.

John: Well, I thought because we had a ball field to the north and the fire was coming west to east that the big yard of the Hostel, and in fact it was mostly cottonwood trees—which it still is today on that side—would pretty much protect the Hostel from any real problems. Some guy decided to spend the night with me, and he got two what they call shake-and-bake tents. We had them, so if we had to we would go in the middle of the yard. It's rather big for being called a yard, but we would just get in there if it came to that. Two Forest Service guys came by and squirted the Hostel with some water just before the fire hit there.

When we went in the Hostel we'd go through the kitchen and then close the door to the kitchen and go into the other part, because it was better breathing there. The kitchen was a little too smoky. In fact, the fire was close enough that it browned a curtain that was facing the fire.



John helped fight a number of wildfires over the years, including the 1988 Red Bench Fire and the 2001 Moose Fire.

Debo: It was that close?

John: Yes. It was the garage that belonged to the Sondresons down there, it was on Lot 1 which is where I had my horses for a short time. An acre is just too small, but that's what I had at the time, and it all burnt up. Frank Vitale had a tractor; I called it Big Red because I had Little Red, the little red tractor. He put the logs together to make it.

Debo: What happened to your horses?

John: My wife Sharon, at that time, had taken them to town. She just disappeared with the horses.

Debo: When you heard the fire was happening she just took the horses?

John: Well, I've never been around them in a fire, but as I understand it horses get really stupid around fires. They go right into it. If a barn is on fire they will go into it anyway, so she took them south and they all got kennel cough. Like dogs can get kennel cough, the horses got some variation of that, so they had to be treated.

Debo: So, the fire came right through here and could have taken the Merc and the Northern Lights Saloon.

John: Well, actually if you look on top of the Merc you'll see there's one or two sheets of metal that are newer than the rest, and that's because of the fire. They figure that there was a firestorm. In other words, it's kind of a blow-up, the air is really rushing, that the firestorm lifted a little bit of the roofing just enough to get a spark in there. The fellow who was the night manager for the fire saw that it was on fire. How he saw it I don't know, because it was such minimal damage, but anyway he broke in the front of the Merc and went up there and hosed it down with a fire extinguisher. He coughed a lot, I think, and saved the Merc. Will Hammerquist's father repaired it. He was a craftsman, a carpenter; he fixed the roof quite a long time ago.

Debo: So, the fire went through a lot of Polebridge, didn't it? Didn't it take some of the cabins in Polebridge?

John: It did. There were 3 or 4 or 5 here that burned during that time, just gone. In the whole fire, out of 100 or so, there were 20 that got burned.

Debo: And the bridge burned, the pole bridge.

John: It certainly did. Usually bridges don't burn, but this one happened to be wood on top of a couple of huge, monstrous I-beams, and they caught on fire. Everything was so dry. In fact, on the Hostel I had skylights, just little bitty things. Actually, they were designed for a van. We were so cheap. I put them in because that's what I could afford, and there were burnt pine needles in there. In fact, the back of the Hostel has kind of a crawl space, an open space. There was some in there, too, and there were little bitty fires in the yard that just burned out because there was no grass to speak of, just a little bit of dry grass—a little smoke and it would be gone. Yes, I remember that fire better than any of the more recent ones, for obvious reasons.

Debo: Because it was right here.

John: We were threatened by it. I think I was the only one, with another guy who spent the night with me, that stayed in Polebridge. Everybody else was evacuated. I didn't know that until the next day.

Debo: But there were firefighters here, right? Or were they all evacuated, too?

John: It depends. They do what they can before the fire, and this kind of fire they just get out of the way and put themselves in a safe situation. I think they were nearby. You would think they were right here; they're not. They would be in a field maybe to the south, the old hay meadow there at Hay Creek or Moran Creek or something like that.

Debo: So. what made you decide to stay rather than evacuate?

John: Well, at that time there was a guy. Earlier there was Mt. St. Helens, where one guy refused to leave. I think he died. But anyway, whatever his name was, that's what Larry Wilson called me because I stayed. "That's stupid." Maybe it's stupid, but I got away with it. There was no problem, so I was the only one here.

Debo: I would think that would be pretty scary.

John: Well, I had never seen trees explode before, but I had thought if the temperatures around the tree is such that the sap turns to a vapor—boom! I saw one blow in half from halfway up, more than halfway up. I had never seen that before. And I discovered that the cottonwoods may not burn very well, but the branches burn off and you just have the trunk left, a charred trunk probably.

Debo: Is that what happened to the cottonwoods?

John: Yes.

Debo: But they were still alive.

John: Well, they were down in the roots, yes, so they'd just come up someplace else. They didn't all get that way, but some of them did.

Debo: So, after the fire moved through, there was probably still spot fires around for a while?



John participated in many Mountain Man Rendezvous events over the years, and officiated at the marriage of Cheryl Watts and Michel Peretiako during the rendezvous held in Sondreson Meadow in 2001.

John: Yes. Actually I had one of the backpack sprayers. I'm trying to remember the nickname they have for them. I had to go around and squirt some of the trees, like the spruce, often. If nobody would cut any limbs off they would go right to the ground and they would be smoldering, or I would see a little something smoldering and I would just go squirt them to keep the wind from blowing it up, because there often is a back burn. There was nothing much of

anything here, but there could have been, not because I did anything but it just didn't happen to happen.

Debo: So that's fire. There's also been water, a big flood.

John: In 1995, yes. My two dogs and I left when it came in the front door. I canoed over to the Merc.

Debo: You could canoe all the way to the Merc from the Hostel?

John: Well, the Merc property is pretty close, 100 to 200 feet away. The water was right down the road, but it was a little deeper over there for canoeing, it worked better.

Debo: Did you know it was coming?

John: No, I didn't. Up north somebody like Jon Elliott must have had a radio phone or something, because he managed to call the county disaster guy and tell him a lot of water was coming down the river. He was much further north, but they didn't believe it. I mean there was no reason to think that, because nothing they had in the U.S. picked up on that. They've since done something so that they can tell if something like that happens again, but at that time it wasn't there. It's in place now. I think it has something to do with the Doppler effect. But anyway, they'll know it's coming in the future, but at that time they didn't know, and the guy who was the disaster coordinator for the county, it turned out, was slowly dying of cancer and he just wasn't functioning very well. A separate issue. I don't think they're particularly related.



Bear spray and coffee? A number of bears were known to visit the Hostel and John's Polebridge property.

Debo: So, the water started rising on the river, and that's when you first noticed it, or it was just coming up into your yard?

John: Yes.

Debo: How fast was it, just in a day?

John: The first clue was when the telephone went off. That meant the water was about between two and three feet high, because it went into the pedestal and shorted it out.

Debo: Was that in the daytime?

John: Early evening sometime. That was still the longer days, so it was still light. In the middle of the night I went out and checked. I got up and drove my Bronco clear down to Lot 1, which is one I owned at the time. Just pulled it down the road where I knew it was a little higher, but I thought, "Well, that was hard." I just barely made it, so I don't think I'm going to ask anyone to move theirs, because I don't think they'll make it. I just made it out.

Debo: The water was already coming up into the road and stuff?

John: Oh, it was over the road. There's a dip there, and it was probably four feet deep.

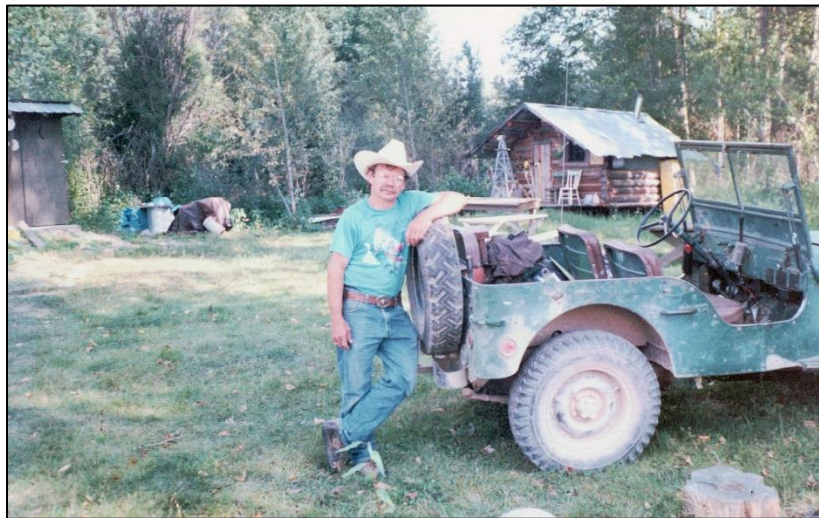
Debo: Did you go back to the Hostel at that point?

John: Yes, I went back to bed, of course.

Debo: You went back to bed?

John: Yes. I mean the river rises; it does that. It never has like that before or since, as far as I'm concerned, but I didn't really think it was going to keep coming.

Debo: And it did.



John and his 1941 Army jeep that originally belonged to Hazen Lawson participated in many Polebridge 4th of July parades.

John: And it did. The next day it came into the house. I don't remember, related to the earliest part of the day. Earlier in the day, I started throwing televisions and stuff upstairs, things like that, so that if the water came into the house it would be better if some of the sensitive stuff wasn't there.

Debo: And it came in the house then?

John: Oh, it did. It was 14 inches deep in the living room and not quite four feet, but close to four feet, in the kitchen. There used to be marks in there you could see. I don't think they're there anymore. I thought holding my hand up and saying "about this high" was good enough.

Debo: What a mess.

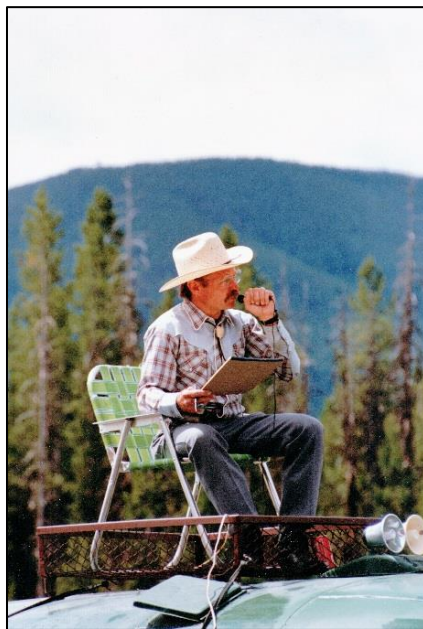
John: I had a kayak in there and, of course, it floated up the road. I didn't want it blowing away. It was easier just to put it inside, see. I did have to go hunting for my propane tank. It had leaked. I had just filled it, and propane apparently is a lot lighter than water, so it floated away and all the gas went out.

Debo: It floated down the river?

John: No, it didn't go that far. It went as far as the first collection of trees. It caught in a bunch of trees that were close together. It wasn't very far away.

Debo: So, you had a lot of damage in the Hostel, didn't you?

John: It was a hell of a mess. It was mud mostly.



John in his role as 4th of July parade master of ceremonies.

Debo: I remember the summer a few months later, after it was cleaned up, there was still mud all over everything in the Hostel, it seemed like.

John: Yes, it was.

Debo: Papers and things like that.

John: In the cracks in the wood floors. They are just like 1" x 4"s on the floor, tongue and groove, and mud got in the cracks. We had to take kitchen knives and pry it out. It was a mess.

Debo: That was pretty much of a disaster, except the cabin stayed there.

John: Yes. And now the propane tank is tied down. It's staked. We had some other close calls, but nothing like that. The water would just come up to a certain point and stop. In 1995, however, I didn't know where my propane tank was for about three days and then Jamie Jonkel, Chuck Jonkel's son, said he saw one over there in a bunch of trees. So, I started walking around, and I found it. And then a fellow named Richard Andersen was over at the Merc filling up his tractor with gasoline, and I said, "Say, can you give me a hand?" He drug it probably about 100 yards or so, back to where it belonged. It was quite a while before things were normal. Frank Vitale brought me some 100-pounders, so I had some propane and lights in the house, which is kind of nice.

Debo: Yes.

John: Then the Montana Wilderness Association sent a work crew to help. It was Kerri Byrne and her husband, Steve Thompson, Ben Long and his wife Karen Nichols. There may have been Stormy Good, too. I'm not sure. I think she was there helping out. They did a work day to clean up the Hostel.

Debo: It's good to have friends.

John: At that time Dick Walsh had the Walsh Cabin towards Big Prairie, just on the edge. The North Valley Rescue folks came with some water spraying stuff and hosed it out and cleaned it up for him. He was one of the founding members of North Valley Search and Rescue. It was an interesting time.

Debo: Interesting times. So, fires, floods, and how about big winter storms? Any big winter storms that got pretty bad?



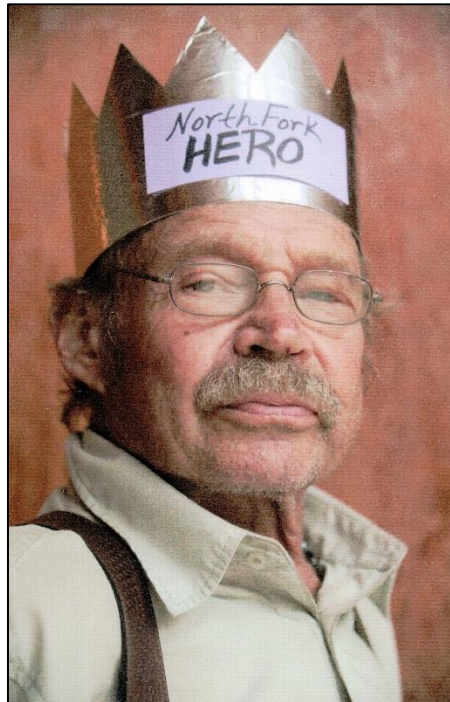
After his marriage to Sue Kates ended, John married Sharon Costantino in 1985. They were elected king and queen of the Polebridge Prom that fall.

John: I'm glad you mentioned that. It was like the day before Thanksgiving, something like that, and there was four feet of powder snow out there. George Ostrom was very worried about his son Shannon. Shannon has something like MD, muscular dystrophy, or something similar to

that, and he was up at Moose City at the border. He was trapped. What was to do? Well, I got with Lee Downes in his big Ford pick-up truck, and we go a mile or so and he would have to clean the radiator off, because it was full of snow. It would cut off the cooling effects. It would overheat. He would clean out the air filter because of the snow. It was such powder it went into the air cleaner, too, and so we went clear to the border like that. I can't remember his name, but almost to the border a logger came ahead of us with a plow on his pick-up, and he was really moving. He finished the last little bit to Moose City, so we could drive right into Moose City. It was a little easier with a snowplow. They were down to a couple of candy bars, so they were very happy to see us. What had happened was they had parked their car on that little shelter that's part of border customs building. They had parked it there, and it wouldn't start, so they just kind of sat there until we got there. Anyway, we got them out. But that was about the most snow I had seen. Starts out four feet of snow, and the next day it's about three feet. It just settles—three feet, two feet, and then it stayed about like that. That's the most I remember.

Debo: Well, one thing I noticed is there's a sign on the wall of your cabin that says "North Fork Crusader #1." Who gave you that sign? I mean, you have a reputation of being a crusader for the North Fork. Do you remember who gave you that?

John: I know who made that. It was given to me on the occasion of my 70th birthday.



John was honored at the 2016 annual meeting of the North Fork Preservation Association for his many years of activism in support of the North Fork, its environment, wildlife, and natural assets.

Debo: Who made it?

John: Gerry Stearns or Richard Wackrow. I'm not sure which one of them. And then there's a picture here. It's best that you describe it. It was part of the same gift.

Debo: “Thanks to our Voice in the Wilderness.” It’s a picture of you kissing a grizzly bear.

John: That was drawn by Carol Vuchetich.

Debo: And there’s a wolf on there, too.

John: Cheryl Watts organized this whole thing at the Hostel, and the picture’s on the wall here. How many would you judge to be up there in the picture? Just make a wild guess.

Debo: 40, 50. I don’t know, how many?

John: 40 sounds about right, but I never counted them. But anyway, I’ve got a picture of all the people who were there, and I appreciated it anyway.

Debo: We appreciate you for all the work you’ve done up here to try to protect the environment of the North Fork.

John: Oddly enough, I don’t get very many thank yous. I don’t. When I get them, I’m very grateful.

Debo: Can you think of any other big struggles up here, environmental struggles?

John: Oh, the coal mine was a big one. I was involved in all of the series starting in 1982, and so 1982 is when it heated up again, so I bought a few shares of stock in the parent company, called Rio Algom, of the one that was here. Sage Creek Coal Limited was the name of it, and so I went like six times to their annual meeting. The first time we didn’t have a second for our motion. I made a stockholder’s proposal to the company.



John purchased 10 shares of stock in Rio Algom and traveled to Toronto six times to attend the annual stockholders’ meeting and protest development of the Sage Creek coal mine just north of the Canadian border.

Debo: So, you went to the stockholder meetings?

John: In Toronto, yes. I did that for like six years. After a while I couldn't afford it, and then the MWA [Montana Wilderness Association] took up a collection so I could go. I would also visit my parents in Ohio, so it wasn't such a hardship as it sounded like, because I was going to go see them anyway.

Debo: So, you would make a motion, and the first time you didn't have anyone to second it? What would your motion be, to close the coal mine down?

John: Yes, for this reason and that reason and the other reason and more reasons, we recommend that you not pursue it any further. I forget exactly how we put it, but saying, "Don't do it," in short. And finally in 1988 I got a letter written in sort of English [British] English saying that the Sage Creek Coal Mine was no longer of significant interest to Rio Algom. I called the guy up and I asked, "What's that mean?" He said, "It means we're not going to do it."

Debo: Yay!

John: That was good. Yes, yay! That was a yay, and later on other companies wanted to do it. The first one wanted to use the exact same location. Well, after a little discussion with them they realized that if the International Joint Commission was to get involved, since the mine was identical it wouldn't go. So, the same company tried it in a different place, and they were somehow discouraged from doing it. And then more recently, after 30 years or more of cajoling the Canadians and trying to be good neighbors, we finally got an agreement between Gordon Campbell, the Premier of British Columbia and Brian Schweitzer, the Governor of Montana, such that they would not have oil and gas in the Flathead of B.C.

Debo: Yay.

John: Of course, they still have what they have coal blocks, which are federal; the others are provincial, so there's still some coal blocks up there that belong to the provincial government, so there's still a little question mark up there, but I think it's going to be all right.

Debo: Thank you for all your work with that.

John: I tried.

Debo: It was successful.

John: Well, luckily, I hardly was alone or we wouldn't have gotten that far.

Debo: You mentioned some of the people up here in the North Fork, like some of the leaders and characters of the North Fork. You've mentioned a few of them, but can you think of other leaders and characters up here?

John: Well, he was never a leader, but he was kind of influential, and that was Tom Ladenburg. He had on boots, and he would always put one pant leg inside the boot and leave the other one out. He just did this. It was standard operating procedure for him. And if there was something real rednecky to say, he would say it. He would be the one.

Debo: He was definitely the character.

John: He was that.

Debo: But he put a conservation easement on his property.

John: He did. Marilyn Wood, who's still with the Nature Conservancy, managed to get that before they canned her, which was a big one. When that happened, the Nature Conservancy felt they had done their part here, and they were kind of pulling out of this area, because that was such a big one.

Debo: That was a big one.

John: But later on, with the agreement between B.C. and Montana that we would match what they did and they wouldn't have oil and gas leases, and the North Fork wouldn't have any oil and gas exploration, the companies that had put money into exploration wanted their money back, which was not totally unreasonable. So, that was part of the Montana-B.C. agreement that they would be paid back. The Nature Conservancy of both the U.S. and Canada worked on the fund. They got the price way down, compared to what they probably said it was initially, a lot down to about \$9 million. It sounds like a lot to me, but anyhow they're raising the money. And the Preservation Association, of which I'm often the perennial president, came up with a thousand or two dollars to give them, and I think it was matched by somebody else, by Fowler Cary.

Debo: Great.



John testified at a 1989 hearing before the Montana Oil and Gas Board, protesting a proposed Cenex test well on the North Fork. (L-R) Jim Jensen, John Frederick Jon Heberling, and Roger Sullivan.

John: So, the Nature Conservancy got back in the area in a different way than it had previously, but in a big way. None of us little guys, little organizations, can deal with \$9 million dollar budgets.

Debo: No, ever, in a lifetime.

John: No.

Debo: That's right. Well, what are some of the close encounters you've had with animals around here in the North Fork?

John: Someone else might call them close encounters. I wouldn't. I had a grizzly bear in my backyard, and I was watching her from the porch. They were just running through. I'm trying to remember if it was a mom and a cub or just a female, but anyway at least one bear just went through. And another time a bear was a little too close. To get out of the area, it's simpler. If you pull your shotgun to the side, and if you're a great distance and the bear is facing the other way, you can pepper them and encourage them to get out, without hurting them any. At a distance, it's just like a little hurt. I did that to one bear to get it out of there, and to protect the bear, too. It came back, but it was caught in a trap. They called him Fred.

Debo: How many years ago was that?

John: Honestly I don't remember, but Lynn Ogle took a picture of the bear and put the date on it. It's over on the Hostel picture board. I didn't take that picture. I left it there.

Debo: On all your hikes you did in the wilderness, did you have any bear encounters?

John: I forgot about this one. I was just with a friend of mine whose name will come to me in a moment. Dick Kuhl. We were doing the Review Mountain Loop and were coming back on the final stretch. It was probably July, and there were still patches of snow here and there, and we could tell a bear was ahead of us. We watched him from a distance, and he was just standing on the trail looking at us. This was quite a distance, and so we just bushwhacked straight down to the road. That's the only time I can think of right now. I guess I was close to one in the Park at Upper Quartz campground. We were at the place you were supposed to cook your food, and about 50 yards away or maybe closer, up on a tiny bluff, was a grizzly bear watching us eat. I told everybody to bang the pots and make lots of noise, and it left. Nothing happened. Sometimes if you know what to do it helps a lot.

Debo: It does. So, you've been in the North Fork for quite a long time, and you've lived here full-time most of the time.

John: I've never seen a wolverine. In 32 years, I've never seen a wolverine.

Debo: I've only seen one. That was in the Park.

John: The Preservation Association is writing a letter supporting closing the trapping season on wolverines. They're likely to be listed next year.

Debo: There's so few of them.

John: It's endangered, yes, and their living is so precarious that just one or two taken out could take out that small population. One of the questions you had written down, tell us about the North Fork social life. What do you do for fun? We hike, we read, we ski, and tell lies.

Debo: And tell lies? [Laughs]

John: That's what we do.

Debo: Well, storytelling has a long tradition.

John: You can describe it differently, elaborate a little bit. That's always okay.

Debo: Well, you've been here a long time. What are some of the big changes you've seen happen in the North Fork?

John: Well, when I came, and when you started coming, the people here were mostly po' folks, and we did a lot of stuff ourselves or it didn't get done, or you couldn't afford it, simple.

Debo: That's right.

John: Now people with money are building really nice places, and there's nothing wrong with that, it's just a change. So, we now have a constituency for the North Fork that might be a little more powerful. That's how I look at it.

Debo: That's a good way to look at it. Are there any other things that you would like to talk about that I haven't asked you?

John: I'm sure there are, but I can't think of them at this particular moment.

Debo: Oh, let me ask you this. A lot of times people call you the Mayor of Polebridge. How did that happen? Where did that start?

John: I think it was 1980 or 1981. I think it was 1981. John O'Hara had the [Northern Lights] saloon, and he thought he would do a little something every week to kind of encourage people to come and get in the habit of coming. He said, "Okay, next weekend we're going to have an election to see who is the Mayor of Polebridge." The previous mayor was Tom Ladenburg, so Tom Ladenburg was the other potential mayor. The next week Tom didn't show up, so I figured I got the election by default, and even people who didn't know anything about that started calling me the Mayor of Polebridge, so that's how it happened. And the pay isn't much.

Debo: Yes. They don't pay you much for that job.

John: I wanted to make business cards, "Mayor of Polebridge, take the credit for everything, responsible for nothing."

Debo: [Laughs] That's pretty good. Oh, one other question, you ran the Hostel for lots of years, and then you sold it. Tell us about that story, the transition.

John: Well, the transition was a little slower than that. About year 17 I had the Hostel, I didn't do as well as I did earlier. I wasn't as patient with people, so I started to need people to help me so I didn't have to do it all day long. And when it got close to 30 years, I wasn't even there anymore. I would be a substitute. Oliver Meister, a German fellow who had been coming since 1992, was running the Hostel. I got him—a green card is not really what it is. I got him an Alien Certification of Labor, is what it's called. I managed to get him one, had to hire a lawyer to do that, and I did. Then after five years I sold it to him, but that's a little quicker story because he wanted to buy it. But when it came the time for me to want to sell, he had cold feet. So, Debbie Kaufman and her husband Dan, who used to own the Merc, would buy properties and flip them.

She would fix them up and resell them at a greater price. So, I talked to her, had her come over and talk about buying the Hostel. She promised me that she would keep it within the family and never sell it; it would be there where she could send people, her family and stuff, when they visit her here, or she could live there herself. Well, Oliver didn't take to that very well. Anyway, he bought the Hostel after that. It took a little nudging.

Debo: I didn't know that story.

John: Well, yes. There's probably a lot of stories you don't know.



John and his good friend Oliver Meister, to whom he sold the North Fork Hostel in 2007.

Debo: You still live pretty close to the Hostel.

John: When I bought this place I wasn't planning to sell the Hostel. It's just that I needed more space than what I had.

Debo: How long was it, almost 30 years?

John: 20-some. I could spend five minutes trying to figure it out, but it's not that big of a deal.

Debo: Well, John, you've been a really important character in the North Fork for a long time, and I appreciate this interview with you.

John: Well, if you're going to call me a character I'm not sure I like the interview.

Debo: I think that's a good word.

John: Okay, I'll take it as a compliment of sorts.

Debo: I think it's a compliment, because it shows an interesting personality and creativity, and not just a regular old run-of-the-mill type person. I think the North Fork is full of characters.

John: It is. They end up here. Some of them do better than others, like what's his name that burned down the yurt [Kent Johnson]. He would have a little dog on the road, and he would make the dog circle around, make a little circle and keep going. He was always on the road with a little dog, Bubba, and Bubba died.

Debo: Yes, lots of characters on the North Fork. That was a great interview, John. On behalf of the North Fork Landowners Association and the North Fork History Project I would like to thank you for your time.



Peter Moore painting of John and Oliver.

