

Naomi Hoiland Oral History Interview

May 2013

Karen: My name is Karen McDonough. Today is Friday, May 31, 2013. I'm interviewing for the first time Naomi Hoiland. This interview is taking place at the Hoiland cabin at 450 Trail Creek Road, Polebridge, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. Naomi, today our first question for you is we would like a little bit of your early background, where and when you were born.

Naomi: Well, I was born in a log cabin, and the log cabin was on Half Moon Lake. My Grampa and Grandma Gaffaney, Clyde and Annie Gaffaney, owned quite a bit of property on Lake 5 and Half Moon Lake. They are separated by a little dike, but we're on the Half Moon side. I was born January 21, 1935 and on my birth certificate it says Belton, but the doctor came. My dad went and got the doctor, and he came on the train. He had to snowshoe into their place. By then I was born, so they tell me, but he checked me out and I was perfectly healthy, end of story. [Laughs] [On the tape, she originally says January 31, but later corrected it to January 21.]

Karen: Can you remember the first time you came to the North Fork?

Naomi: Oh, if memory serves me correctly, I think I was about 4 years old, 3 or 4. You see, I was actually raised by my grandparents.

Karen: And their names were?

Naomi: Ruth and Burt Coan. I came up with them probably when I was 4 years old. It was in the summertime. I know it was in the summertime because Grandpa Burt worked for the Forest Service. He was a smokechaser and on a trail crew. He might have come down a couple of years before and done this, because he was a seasonal worker for the Forest Service. He lived at Ford Ranger Station. Nana decided that when he was permanently up here for seasonal work she would come up, too. They bought the house that belongs to Doug Barnes now. It's a junk heap, but oh dear, it was a nice house and it was right next to the Holcolms [Harry and Lena]. I was probably 4 years old, because when I was 5 we went up to Lion Lookout, and I walked the whole way. Nana and I went up to visit Grandpa Burt for the weekend up on Lion Lookout. I had a wonderful childhood, and those are fond memories. Grandpa Burt always had a couple of chipmunks that he'd caught in a live trap that he made, and I would get to feed them when we were there, and I got to eat little cans of grapefruit. Oh, I thought that was wonderful. We appreciated our treats much more than we do now, and our treats were very simple, but that was fun.

Later, they shut the lookout down, and then Grandpa Burt came up here to do trail work. Nana and I came up, and they needed a schoolteacher. The one was retired and gone, and she was living in the house, and Nana bought the house from her. She handed over all of her supplies and everything, and I started first grade when I was 5 years old at the Ford schoolhouse. So, that was

my first time up here. I have a lot of fond memories on the North Fork, but they are all concerned with just everyday living. It was just a joy because you had the mountains.

We have a funny story. There were quite a few, it seemed like a roomful of kids, but there couldn't have been because there couldn't be that many kids. [Wynona] "Nonie" Day was there, and her husband [Jack] Mathison was one of the students, and a roomful of Wurtz kids, because there were so many of them. I don't remember the names of the other kids, but Nonie used to play the organ, I think, and we used to have fun. Oh gosh, we would sing all kinds of good songs. I have the little yellow music book that we sang from that was Ruth A. Coan's, my grandmother.

Anyway, one day we were busy doing our work in school and it was cold. It was late in the fall. All of a sudden a whole bunch of men were running back and forth, and we couldn't figure it out. I can vividly remember Nana saying, "Is there a problem?" She opened the door, and they said the schoolhouse's roof was on fire and there was a chimney fire. It was a long ways, it seemed forever, to the river. Today the river goes right up almost to the schoolhouse in the yard, but it was a long ways away then. They had a bucket brigade, and I can just see that. I was fascinated with it, the bucket brigade of water to put out the chimney fire. [Laughs]

But that was that; fond memories of the school. I remember getting slapped on the hands with a ruler by my grandmother because I did something bad, but I don't remember what it was. [Laughs] Oh dear. I guess that's all I remember about the first grade, because actually I don't know that we went the whole year. No, we didn't. We went through Thanksgiving. I remember having Thanksgiving at, I think, Holcolms. Lena always had everybody there, and that was so much fun. Then I think it must have been about Christmas time the school shut down, because somebody died and so then they had to move to town and there weren't enough kids in the school, I think. But anyway, that's as I remember it.

Karen: Do you remember when you came back again on the North Fork, about what age you were for summers with your grandma?

Naomi: Yes, every summer I came back. Sometimes, like I said, Grandpa Burt was on a lookout. He was on Canyon Lookout and Lion Lookout. Those were the two that he did. They are no longer there anymore, but Canyon was just up a little ways, and that was a much nicer lookout. It was a real nice lookout. Lion was up on a huge stand, and it scared you half to death to climb up there. Oh my gosh, I remember a lightning storm at Lion. I will never forget that. The wind blew, and I just knew that we were going to fall right off, but Grandpa Burt said, "Oh don't worry, don't worry, it's safe," and so well, okay. I got up and he let me use the azimuth, kind of look at it, and he spotted a fire and called it in. That was the life on the lookout.

Karen: Were the lookouts in the North Fork?

Naomi: Those weren't in the North Fork. They were around Hungry Horse. Bob Marshall, up that way. Lion Lookout is by Lion Lake, and Canyon Lookout was farther out. But then he would come up to the North Fork and work on the trail crews. I suppose he worked with Ralph Thayer and some of those fun guys. There were a bunch of characters up here.

Let's see, what was it like up the North Fork? It was beautiful. It was just what the sign down the road says "Little Peace of Heaven." It was the last good place in the world, it truly was. Every morning was just fun and games for me. I would help. I would go with Grandpa Burt; that was the most fun thing to go with Grandpa Burt across the road to get water. We had a little spring where he had some property on the other side of the road, and we would go and get water. I had little buckets that I carried, and he had the big buckets. We would carry the water, and we would get Nana all set up with water and everything, and then we'd go fishing. And oh, if that wasn't fun. I would walk along with Grandpa Burt and we'd fish for bull trout. Sometimes we'd count them, sometimes we didn't. I remember one time we waded out on the island. The water was such that we could wade out, and there was one – oh my gosh he looked like he was 50 feet long, but I know he was only about 25 inches. He had a bull head caught in his throat, and he drowned, and he was up on the shore. Maybe I cried a little, because I thought why didn't we catch him and he wouldn't die like that? But that's Mother Nature.

Karen: Did your grandmother fry the fish that you caught, or did she can them for you?

Naomi: Both. She did both. We had many fish fries. Maybe that's why I don't like fish now [laughs], because we ate so much. In those days you ate what was available, and that was deer and elk and moose and fish. Well, we had chicken. We had chickens in Columbia Falls when we lived there.

Karen: That's a little bit about your youth; can you remember now when you became a teenager and a young adult?

Naomi: Oh well, growing up we would come up here in the summer. Even when we didn't live here we would come up here in the summer. I would go to school with Nana. We lived in the teacherage in various places—Half Moon, but most of the time was up by Eureka and Olney. In the summertime, then we would come up here and oh, it was just delightful. But we would have beautiful, wonderful picnics. Down in the schoolyard we would have the picnics, and they were big affairs.

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Karen: The date is now October 8th, Tuesday, 2013. After a break for a busy summer we are continuing our interview with Naomi Hoiland.

Naomi: Well, hello. [Laughs] Here we are again after a very busy summer and just now getting started. I guess we covered a lot of the background of our being here, but some things happened in various times. I remember one year I was here at the cabin by myself, with the dogs—at that time it was Bogie and Clem. It was in 1996, and Duke went to meet his buddies from Washington. They were going into the Yaak, and a terrible storm hit, just unbelievable. It was one like I remember from my childhood when we were always snowed in, but this time I was snowed in and Duke was snowed out. His nephew, who was going to take us up to his place in the Yaak, was caught in Browning in the snowstorm and couldn't get back, and his friends in Washington had a terrible, terrible ice storm. It was just awful. It just ruined so many things.

They were over a week without power, and they didn't know what to do. So, they couldn't meet him either. Duke tried to get home, but the road was literally shut because of snow, and he had to stay in town in Coram with my folks, and if that wasn't something. [Laughs] Oh dear. You would have to know my folks to know what his experience was.

But anyway, he tried every day to get back up here, and every day he was turned back. Finally, finally the snowplow started up. They had been stuck in Kalispell, but they started up to the North Fork and he followed the snowplow up and finally got home. He says, "Oh, how have you been? What's happened?" I said, "Oh well, the dogs and I had a wonderful time. We were warm. We had plenty of food because I have a stockpile of food in the laundry room and everything was fine." He says, "Well, my experience wasn't so good." [Laughs] But be that as it may, I had a wonderful time and it was very, very beautiful up here. You haven't lived until you've been in a place like this, and after a snowstorm, a real snowstorm, then it clears off and it's just a bluebird day every day. By that I mean the sky is so blue it just about knocks your eyes out, and the sun comes up and it's just sparkly. Oh boy, the dogs and I just romped and rolled in the snow waiting for Duke. Then finally one day here he came. I was snowbound for three days, that's all. That wasn't very much.

Karen: Tell us about the fire that you were so close with.

Naomi: That was very traumatic, the Wedge Canyon fire of 2003. Every 10 years I have a birthday party for Duke, and we had his 50th. It was so much fun with the neighbors, and then we had a 60th where we crowned him and we had lots of different hats. He's a man who wears different hats, too. But then the 70th was supposed to be a big party. The plans were all set and made, and along comes the fire. The only way I can describe the fire, when it really got going, was we'd look out the window and it sounded like you were in a freight yard with freight trains coming and going, and then you'd look around and it would look like a war zone because the flames were coming so high. Every once in a while there would be an explosion. That, of course, was a tree instead of a bomb, but there's not much difference in the two. The destruction that the fire wreaks is just unbelievable, but we watched it, and every night we'd go to bed and think, "Well, thank God for this day, and if we live to see another one, we'll thank God for that," and the next morning we would wake up and things hadn't really changed.

It did burn a swath starting on Wedge Canyon and Cleft Rock and what they called the Horseshoe, and it swept on down and across the creek. Duke was fighting with the crews that were here, because we were a safe zone and [Larry and Ruth] Kinsolving's was a safe zone, too. We watched the fire go over their place and thought, "Oh no," but they survived. It just went over the top. It all happened that way because we all listened to Lynn Ogle. Well, not all, but some of us did, and we were prepared. We had fire hydrants. We had hoses coming up from the creek. Since our place was so easily accessible and so fire safe, they would come down, and our granddaughter Caleigh had to direct traffic. She finally made a sign, because she got so darn busy keeping the pump going down in the creek. They would drive up and stop and fill up. It took about seven minutes to fill and take off again, and the next truck would come and stop and fill up. It was that way every day. I think it lasted about three or four weeks?

Karen: I believe so.

Naomi: Yes, something like that. Anyway, when Duke is interviewed he will get the facts straight, because he is a fact man and I'm not. Anyway, it was a very scary experience. We tried to get up to turn our neighbor's water on, but they turned us back. The fire crews and everything were just coming out. It was just a mass exodus, and it was so scary. I just can't even describe how we felt, but we were so doggone busy that you just worked and did your thing. We were exhausted at night and fell asleep and woke up the next morning and we were still alive and we were still all in one piece—our property, our place. We had plywood boards on all the windows. Duke had marked them ahead of time so that he would be able to put them up in a hurry, because we knew some day the fire was going to come. The glass on the old screen porch, which we have glassed-in, we had it all covered. The only thing the fire people said that we hadn't taken care of properly was our deck, because fire could have gotten in under that and the whole place would have gone up. But we watered. We had huge fire hoses, and we watered down all the buildings, and the sawmill was saved because the fire hydrant was out by the sawmill and the big tank on the hill and the pump in the creek. Boy, we were like a bunch of bees in a beehive, busy.

Karen: And it's just such a miracle that only buildings were lost in that fire.

Naomi: Oh yes. It was a miracle. God watched out for us, that's for sure.

Karen: Okay, Naomi, I think we're going to finish up with talking about changes that you've seen over time, things that you can share with us before we wear you out tonight.

Naomi: My grandmother bought this second place, which is on Trail Creek, and it's 150 acres instead of 80. We own 80 acres, but it's 150 acres altogether. Most homesteads were 160 acres, almost everywhere, but apparently Austin Weikert didn't prove up completely, so he lost 10 acres to the Forest Service across the creek.

Karen: That's interesting.

Naomi: Yes, that's the only thing we can figure out.

Karen: Can you think of any changes that come to your mind right away? I'm sure there are so many.

Naomi: Well, I've seen a change in the population. There's been quite an influx of people. I've seen changes in the types of houses that are built. There are \$1 and \$2 million-dollar homes being built around here, and our little humble abode, our little log house looks kind of funny compared to those, but it's home sweet home and we do enjoy every single day that we're in it. Our kids enjoy it an awful lot, too.

Then I guess it was impossible to stop, but the advent of technology has been a pain, a puzzle. As technology goes, it's good when it works, but it's horrible when it doesn't, like the little girl with the curl. Technology has really changed things. They even changed the name of the hall. It's no longer the North Fork Improvement Association, which is very sad because that was a bit of history; it's now the North Fork Landowners Association, and I don't like that too much, because

well, when you get our age—Duke had his 80th birthday this year—it's hard to accept change. I guess that's the biggest changes that I've seen. We've got some wonderful people that have moved in, though. I tell you, I just can't even begin to name them all, but our neighbors and our friends that are here are so neat, and we cherish every minute that we have with them.

Karen: Naomi, thank you so much. I've really appreciated having this time with you and sharing it with you.

Naomi: I've appreciated you, too. Then when our kids were a little bit older we started going to the Community Hall a lot, like every Saturday night, and they had wonderful things. They had the hat dance, and they had a costume dance. Our kids always went to it, and they always won. [Laughs] Very competitive. The hat dance was an awful lot of fun, and then the ice cream social; that's been going on forever, forever and ever. A lot of young kids up here, you'd be surprised, and our kids really enjoyed all the grandkids and kids up here.

Mid Connelly [Austin Weikert's daughter] says that my grandmother stole this property from her parents. Her parents left and went to Washington state, I'm not sure where, to try and make a living, because they weren't making one up here, or a very good one anyway. And they all packed up and left and didn't pay the taxes. It came up at a sheriff's sale for taxes, and my grandmother bought it from the county for taxes. It was in 1947, but it was about \$300 that she paid for 80 acres. Mid Connelly told us that she thought it was theft because her mother had almost saved enough money to pay the taxes, but my grandmother got it first. Be that as it may, I like to think that my grandmother didn't even know the Weikerts, and I'm sure she didn't. You know, the county has a long time before they put property up for sale.

Karen: Before it goes up for auction, yes it does.

Naomi: But those were lean years. Those were war years.

[End of recording]