

Ray Hart Oral History Interview

October 13, 2011

Debo: My name is Debo Powers, and today's date is October 13, 2011. I am interviewing for the first time Ray Hart. This interview is taking place at 13750 North Fork Road, which is north of Polebridge, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So Ray, tell us about your early background. Where and when you were born and a little bit about growing up.

Ray: Okay. Well I was born in 1929, March 22—so I'm 82—in Deaf Smith County, Texas. Deaf Smith, that was his full name. I assume he was deaf. He was a pioneer in the panhandle of Texas. The county seat of Deaf Smith County is Hereford Texas, which in Boston is pronounced Hereford, as it is England. Therefore, when I'm in Boston . . . Well, the first time I was in Boston I wanted to find Hereford Street. I asked people and no one knew what I was talking about, so I wrote it for them and they said, "Oh, you mean Hereford." Anyway, I was born on a ranch, the Escavada Ranch about 40 miles northwest of Hereford, Texas, which is famous now for miles and miles of feed lots. It's an industrial beef production operation. Cows walk in one end of a chute and come out frozen at the other.

Debo: Wow.

Ray: Also, they had irrigation there even when I was a child, and they grew potatoes and some truck crop. But we were 40 miles from town, and our only means of transport was horse-drawn vehicles—wagons and so on—so we went to town maybe twice a year, something like that. Houses were even sparser than here, I would say, rarely fewer than 8 or 10 miles between them because these were large ranches and farms. I went to a one-room school which was in Rhea. There are a lot of classical names there, as there are in Montana. Rhea was the wife of Zeus, as I recall in Greek mythology. A one-room school, a one teacher school in which there were six students, who taught all grades.

When I was about I guess six we moved off the ranch. My father managed to get a sharecropping deal on a farm that was about 20 miles away, the nearest from where I was born. The nearest town to the place where we moved was called Bovina, Texas, which was Spanish for cow. It had the reputation of being the largest cattle-shipping point in the world at that time, because it was the western most outpost of the XIT ranch, which was the largest ranch in the world. It covered what is now about 24 counties and was a Scottish combine. Am I saying too much? You may not want to know all this stuff. It was a Spanish-Scottish combine that was a consortium. It built the state capital in Austin, in exchange for which they were given this huge amount of land which covered really almost all of the panhandle of Texas.

We stayed there until it got time for at least four of us to go to high school, whereupon we moved to this metropolis of Bovina, the population of which was under 100. Dad bought a little place at the edge of town, a farm, and that's where all of us went to high school. This time there were six kids in my grade.

Debo: So, a much bigger school.

Ray: A much bigger school, yes, where we had I think four teachers and a superintendent. An interesting thing is that I think everyone in my class went to college, which was a first for that community. I didn't have a single teacher in high school who was a college graduate. None of them had had any education classes, therefore they knew their subject matters, so you really learned English, you really learned history, you really learned math. Nothing about pedagogy and all that. They were among the best teachers I ever had.

I went on from there to a small college, a Methodist college in Abilene, Texas, McMurray University, McMurray College then. In the entire faculty there was one person who had a PhD, and she was the lousiest teacher there. But these were wonderful, wonderful people, most of them elderly ladies. In my junior year, they called me in and said, "Ray Lee"—they called me Ray Lee. You used both names in those days, but in the South generally.

Debo: That's right.

Ray: "Ray Lee we've taught you everything you know. You're wasting your time. You should leave. We want to recommend you go to the University of Texas in Austin," which is what I did. It was a very tough year for me, because I had to work out a major. We didn't have majors at McMurray. I overdo everything, and so I had a triple major in German—which I had never had—English literature, and philosophy. But by the middle of the semester I was reading Goethe, Faust, and Schiller. You know, when you have to learn you have to learn. Anyway, I finished my B.A. there. Then I went to SMU [Southern Methodist University] for a master's, and then on to Yale for my doctorate, and that's more than you want to know.

Debo: When did the North Fork come in?

Ray: A little background. My first teaching job was at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. One of my early colleagues there was Robert W. Funk, who was even then a rising scholar. We became fast friends, and he began telling me stories about Montana. He was himself a Hoosier from Indiana. But his roommate at Butler College in Indiana was from Kalispell, Montana. At the end of Bob Funk's second year, the college doctor called him in and said, "Mr. Funk, you're working yourself to death. You've got to take the summer off or you're going to ruin your health." "I can't take the summer off," he said, "I have to work to make money to come back to school." The doctor said, "Okay, I told you. You're going to regret it."

So he went home and told his roommate, and his roommate said, "Well, hell, come spend the summer with me; we'll just live off the land." They came out and hiked in Glacier National Park all summer and just lived off berries and fishing and animals and so on. This was in the 1940s. He fell in love with the place. After he finished his graduate work he kept coming to the North Fork. He said he loved the Park, but he loved the North Fork, and the old doc who owned the Ford Schoolhouse [Dr. George Rockwell], was from South Texas. He was getting very old and liked Bob and offered to sell him the cabin. So, Bob talked with me about it, and I thought he was a damn fool, you know, because this guy wanted \$2,000 for a log cabin and three acres of land. I said, "Bob how long will that take to pay out?" He said, "What do you mean pay out?" "Well, what can you make off of it?" He said, "Nothing." I thought he was a damn fool.

Ultimately, he had sense enough to buy it. We met in 1957 at Drew. In 1963, I left Drew and went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where Bob had received his PhD. Once I got there I managed to open a job for Bob, so then Bob moved to Vanderbilt. In 1965, Bob was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which is probably the most prestigious fellowship in the world, and he was going to spend it at Tübingen, Germany. He said, "Why don't you and Fern and the kids go out and stay in our cabin?" in the summer of 1965. I talked to Fern, and the boys were wild to go west, so we did, and we came up.

Prior to that time, Bob had pastored a little First Christian Church in Polson, Montana. He developed a lot of friends there, and one of them owned the John Deere outfit in Polson. He said, "You just get yourself to Polson." I'm sorry I can't recall his name now, it will come to me. His friend just dropped everything. He and his wife got in the pick-up with their kids and drove us up to Bob's cabin. Well, it was a good thing he did, because I couldn't have gotten anything going—the generator, or the water system. You had to prime the hand pump and all that stuff. They also introduced us to the dearest people who have ever been on the North Fork, Loyd and Ruth Sondreson, who lived in the old Top Hat house at that time. I'll say more about them later.

So, that's how we got to the North Fork, and we got bitten by it. I should say that I wanted to come because I had never fly-fished. Bob called me about four days before they were leaving for Germany, and he said, "Have you caught any fish?" I said, "No, I don't know how to fly-fish." I just had a cane pole and worms and stuff, and you don't do that on the North Fork. So he said, "All right, that does it, I'm coming out. I've got to show you how to fish. I'll be up tomorrow as soon as I can get a plane reservation." This is how different things are now—he had called the Ford Ranger Station, and the ranger came up and got me and took me down, and we talked on the old crank phone. It was a DC line. He called back in an hour or two, and then the ranger brought the message that I was to meet him in Great Falls the next day about 6:00 o'clock. So I drove down to Loyd's, and this is how dumb I was. I said, "Loyd, where is Great Falls?" He said, "Why do you need to know?" I said, "Well, Bob Funk's coming in at 6:00 o'clock tomorrow afternoon, and I've got to meet him. How long will it take?" He said, "Oh, I think about an hour and 10 minutes." So I said, "Fine." He said, "Be here at 4:30," or something like that. So, I drove down, and Loyd had rolled out his airplane. We got in the plane and flew to Great Falls. Bob's plane was late, and when we got back it was dark. I won't go into that.

Debo: But you flew him up here.

Ray: He couldn't stand it—he had never missed a summer, and he never did after that until he moved to California. That's how I knew about the North Fork. I will just interject some comments here, because I know one of the questions is what has changed in all the time I've been here. Having come in 1965, that's 47 years I've been up here. I would say probably the most palpable change is that this was a much, much smaller place in terms of the number of people. Year-round people probably weren't more than eight or ten, at least from Polebridge north to the border. If I can introduce a couple of technical terms from sociology, Weber, a great 19th Century German sociologist, really the father of the field, distinguished between a *Gesellschaft* and a *Gemeinschaft*, that means distinguishing between a society and a community. A community is sort of like a family, you know, and a society is where people are discriminated by what they do and their profession and this, that, and the other. You get a society together

because you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, that kind of thing, but it's not a real community. But this was a real community and in no sense a society.

When you went to meetings at the Hall, what was then called the North Fork Improvement Association—actually the Hall hadn't been built at that time; they would meet in each other's homes for all sorts of events [the Community Hall was built in 1953]. They often met in the McFarland Ranch headquarters over in the Park, and sometimes up at Helen Foreman's. We didn't meet in the homesteader cabins because they weren't big enough. From the first summer I was interested in trying to get a place up here. I never saw a "for sale" sign for the first 20 years I was here, and people didn't tell you that there was land for sale. Why? They were looking you over, because they weren't going to let just anybody in. They're not going to tell anyone there's land available up here until they decide whether they want you here or not.

In the midst of all this, of course, there have been forever and from the beginning feuds, constant feuds. They are landowners of a society now, and people bring their own histories, and it takes a long time for people to get acquainted, and so on and so on. But in those days it really was a closed community. You could come up here. They didn't object to tourists; they just didn't want them to stay. They didn't want them living up here.

So, let's see. Early in 1967 I had a letter from Loyd Sondreson telling me that there was a cabin and a piece of land that I might be able to buy worth the money. He's the first one who had ever done that, and he's the one who mattered the most, because he was the patriarch up here. I said, "Well, how does this land come on the market?" He said there's a good guy and a bad guy that own it. Buzz is the bad guy and, of course, he's from California, and the good guy's name was Hans Anderson, believe it or not. He's not the one who wrote the children's story, but Hans Anderson was a really good guy. He was a retired Army guy and he loved his horses, so he had corrals and a barn here, and so on, on the place. The barn I changed into a **rooming** cabin eventually.

Well, the story of how it became available is the good guy didn't hunt, but the bad guy hunted and he broke all the laws. In the summer of 1966 he brought a gang of his California buddies, and they got all liquored up and chased a herd of elk up near the border and simply slaughtered them. They didn't skin them. They didn't take the horns, the racks. They didn't eat them or anything; they just left them to die. Well, that was an unspeakable breach of the code up here. You know, I never saw a game warden up here for 20 or 30 years. I think the truth was that the old homesteaders, when they would get hungry in the winter they would go out and shoot a deer and no one ever said anything. But to slaughter a herd of elk and just leave them—so, Loyd organized a posse. He didn't have any trouble getting them together, and they chased Buzz and his buddies to the Idaho border. They didn't catch them, but then Loyd wrote him a letter and said "Buzz, if you ever show your ugly face on the North Fork again you're a dead man. You don't believe it, you try it." So, that's when he said, "I think you can buy that land worth the money."

I couldn't afford to do it myself, so Bob and I went in together and bought this place, and then ultimately I bought it from them. So, that's more than you want to know.

Debo: That's great. What a story.

Ray: That's how I got up here, and I don't think I've missed a summer since.

Debo: When you first lived up here you lived in the little homestead cabin?

Ray: Yes, that was all there was. Well, there was what they called the bunk house. There was an ice room and a wood storage room and a general catch-all place next to it. This place was the southern quarter; it was the South 80 of a half section. The homesteaders were Harry and Lena Holcolm, who have the blue house just north of me, the next one up from Doug Barnes' on the right. In Barnes' place there was an old, as we call them, widow woman – what was her name? [Ruth Coan, married to Bert Coan] I'm sure Larry Wilson can tell you. At all events, Harry and Lena were wonderful people, and their daughter Esther, she was sparking Walt Hammer. We will come back to Walt Hammer. Harry did not like Walt Hammer. He joined a large company. Harry was a German expat. Harry did not like Walt Hammer, but he did like Ralph Day a lot, so he said to Esther, "Now it's your business. You pick your husband, but if you pick Ralph I'll give you the South 80," so she was smart.

Debo: She was smart and did that.

Ray: She got the South 80, and we bought 40 of that.

Debo: So, that little homestead cabin was where they lived?

Ray: That's where they lived, yes. It was built in 1914, I think, so in three years it would have been 100 before we moved it up here. Harry and Lena farmed the meadows, as did Ralph and Esther, this here, and they made a living somehow or other. And I know you're interested in roads and that sort of thing. I'll come back to that when we talk more about Harry.

Debo: You knew a lot of the homesteaders up here, then.

Ray: I knew all of them who were alive at that time. I believe I did. I knew the ones on the south end less well than up here. We might just, if you want to transition to that.

Debo: Yes, I would like to hear about the homesteaders.

Ray: Well, mind you it was difficult to get around up here. I thought we would never get up here. It took us three hours from Columbia Falls to get to Ford Station, and that was with a guy leading us. It was a one-way road.

Debo: That was in the 1960s?

Ray: Yes, this was in 1965. It was a one-way road, and of course they were logging the piss out of this country up here, so you had to be prepared to meet a logging truck every 20 minutes or so. They would just come, and they never slowed down. It was a one-lane road, so when you saw one of these guys coming you got into reverse, wherever you were going, uphill or downhill, and you backed until there was a little place aside of the road. You would get off so they could barrel on past you. So, there wasn't a lot of going up and down the North Fork Road. In fact, the mail carrier in those days, Fred Boss, was a wonderful man. And Ted Ross was the owner of the store, the Merc. Unlike today, most people bought their groceries at the Merc, because going to town

was such an ordeal, and of course you couldn't carry a lot of stuff. You would just give Ted a list, and the next time he went down he would buy your groceries and just charge you what he paid for them. We didn't know anything about this road—we sent probably of average of two tires once a week down with the mailman to get them fixed, and he would get them fixed and you would just pay him what it cost and so on.

So, why don't we start up north, and I'll try to work south about the homesteaders? I guess there was no one at the border at the time. Well, there was George Ostrom, the guy who writes for the *Daily Inter Lake*. He wasn't a homesteader, but he's an old-timer. I guess the first people I'll say something about south of the border would be Helen Foreman, and I don't recall her husband's name [Orville]. He was an attorney. They were from Illinois, but she was sort of the matriarch of the North Fork, and Richard Hildner is either related to her or is the executor [caretaker] of the Foreman estate, I think. Helen was a grand lady. She and Fern, my wife, became very good friends, because Fern was working in the League of Women Voters once we moved here and got very active in the State League of Women Voters, and Helen had been National President of the League of Women Voters. But they were staunch republicans and she was, in fact, I think chair of the Republican National Committee one year. They were very sophisticated people, but they were also really down-home up here. As I think I may have indicated, we held some of the North Fork Improvement Association meetings in their home, and they had a big barn that we also used for square dances and so on. I haven't been up there in years, so I hope that barn is still intact.

Then in that area, not a homesteader but a wonderful old-timer was George Walter. He was dean of Macalester College in Wisconsin, if I've got my schools straight [in St. Paul, Minnesota], and he and his wife [Dorothy] were wonderful people. Their son David grew up up here, and he became head of the Montana Historical Society. His daughter Emily and her siblings still have a part of the place.

I guess among the first real homesteader south that I knew was Ralph Thayer on Trail Creek. He was a gentle soul, a bachelor his entire life [actually, he was married twice – LEW], worked for the Forest Service. I forget his technical title, but one of the things he did was the surveying. He did all the surveying on the North Fork and did it badly. He did it as well as you could, with chains and whatever else they used. For example, on my place I went by his survey when I developed my spring box. According to his survey it was on my land. But when the Forest Service came through with their geophysical instruments and helicopters and all their positioning where it's infallible, or they claim it is, it turned out I was 150 feet over in the Forest Service land. But when I found that out I went to the head ranger and said, "You know about Ralph Thayer's surveying." He smiled and said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'm another victim of it." Anyway, they gave me a permit. Ralph was, in addition to surveying, I think what they called a timber cruiser for the whole North Fork, and it did it on bear paws, snowshoes. At the auction I bought his bear paws.

Debo: Oh, you did?

Ray: Yes, so I have Ralph's bear paws. I was terribly interested in that cabin of his on Trail Creek, and I asked him about it once. He said—I guess I shouldn't say this—he said he was going to sell it to someone local. I wasn't local. I hadn't been here 50 years. That person did a lot

of subdividing, which I don't like. But anyway, as you know Nancy and John Hubbell have that place now [since sold to Chuck and Ginny Ludden – LEW].

Working south, the next couple would be Frank and Ella Wurtz. Like most couples, they had a half section, because the husband or one of them could file for one quarter and the other one could file for another. You had to live on them X-amount of time and all that stuff, so it made sense to try to get as much land as you could, which would be 320 acres. Well, Frank was said to be a full-blooded Cherokee and evidently had a mean streak in him, which Ella discerned early on. So, on her quarter section she got all the water rights to the whole half section, and when Frank got mean—this gives new meaning to cutting somebody's water off—she would cut his water off.

Debo: [Laughs]

Ray: Until he straightened up. That was her way to handle spouse abuse. [Laughs] But they were wonderful people. One winter he got bored, so he undertook to hew all the logs inside this two-story house. To do that and to get the corners trued up he must have been really bored, and he must have made a terrible mess. I could see why his wife might have gotten a little pissed with him. That place was bought by the Jokersts, Jim and Carol. She and her family were from Amarillo, Texas, where Fern is from, and Fern and her dad knew Carol and her dad very well. Her dad was a tycoon who owned a chain of international hotels. Jim was an artist, a painter, and a wildlife biologist. They were wonderful neighbors. And I also wanted that place. [Laughs]

But at that time my boys, Morgan and Bracken, were getting ready to go to college and I had to decide between sending them to college or buying some more land. It's a good thing I didn't buy it, except it would have been a great thing to have and to hold onto and sell, as was proved by the people who bought it from the Jokersts, namely Dick and Barbara Lawrence who subsequently split, but their daughters Tina and Karen and what's the boy's name [Andrew]? It's not going to come to me. All the kids are now in Montana, though Barbara and Dick owned a chain of camera, photo, and hi-fi equipment stores from Jackson Hole to Seattle, and Barbara has kept those. Dick, I think, did construction after he left. But Barbara was German, so she kept milk cows, and they had a big garden and they had chickens, so we had milk and butter and eggs and fresh chickens as long as they were around. Of course, we bought them. They also had horses.

Okay, moving south. Wurtz's, then there would be the Raders. I forget their given names [Fred and LuLu]. They were Dutch. Jon and Pat Elliott bought their place, and it was the showplace up here. Mrs. Rader was a wonderful gardener. She's responsible for all those wonderful flowers in the garden and on the property. Jon and Pat owned a wood stove store in Columbia Falls. Jon was a professional surveyor and did surveying after Ralph quit, and his equipment was right. That is to say, it was within 100 yards of being right, something like that. Ralph was within 100 yards of being right, but not exact. I knew the Raders, but I met them only after they moved to Missoula and lived in a double-wide. [Earlier they had both worked at Kintla Ranch - LEW] I didn't know them when they were up here. The Elliotts had the place when I bought here.

There was another couple from Great Falls down on the river, but they were not homesteaders. Trudy and John Stonestreet had the place on the left immediately north of me [now owned by Slenns]. Trudy Stonestreet was the sister of Ruth Lawson. Hazen and Ruth Lawson had the

Square Peg Ranch down by Polebridge, which is owned by John Frederick now. Ruth's sister was Trudy Stonestreet. Now, you know I'm uncertain whether Hazen was a homesteader or not [no, he wasn't]. I'm just not sure about that, but they were certainly wonderful people. Hazen was a small-town school superintendent in lots of places in northwestern Montana—Eureka and Libby and Sunburst and places like that.

Moving south, across from Stonestreets were Harry and Lena Holcolm, who are our nearest neighbors, homesteaders. Harry always won the blue ribbon for his rutabagas, the biggest rutabaga at the Flathead County Fair. One year it was so big he put it in a #2 washtub with another washtub on top of it and tied the bales together, and that's how he got it down to the fair. They were hard scrabble homesteaders. A story or two about them. As you know, that house has got a front room and then a kitchen in between and the bedroom at the back. One night Harry heard a ruckus in the front room, the sitting room, and grabbed a flashlight and his shotgun and opened the door into the room. There was a grizzly up on his hind legs. So, he shut the door and went back in the bedroom. Then he heard him break through into the kitchen, throwing pans and raising hell. Then he knocked down the door to the bedroom.

Debo: Oh.

Ray: Harry was standing there with the shotgun. The bear reared up again, fortunately, and he shot him in the heart and dropped the grizzly at the foot of their bed. He was just sitting up in the bed with his shotgun. [Laughs]

Debo: That's a good story.

Ray: I asked him how, because when he homesteaded here there was no road. I don't understand this, because I don't know how people got up to Moose City, which was a thriving population. At least the road was not usable in the winter; maybe that's the way to put it. I asked him, "How do you live up here in the winter?" He said, "Well, you make two trips to the store. You wait until the North Fork freezes over, and you hitch up a team. You put spikes going down out of the horseshoes. Of course, you've got spikes to go up to nail in the shoes, and then you put some down. You have a big sleigh, and on a winter day it will take all day to get to the store. Then you spend the night with Bill Adair or whoever was running the store at the time. Adair had the store at that time, and you'd go down and get barrels of flour and kegs of salt and pepper and sides of ham, if you hadn't raised enough hogs. You would get all your staples and spend a day or two down there." They'd play cards and drink whiskey, I suppose. Then they would come back up. In the winter they would go out and saw big blocks of ice, take their ice tongs and bring them in. Everyone had a meat room. We did here. Ralph built one for Esther here. You would have these big thick walls filled with sawdust, and you would just set these blocks of ice and hang your deer and elk and meats, whatever you were going to eat for the winter.

I told you about the rutabagas, told you about the bear, told you about how they got to town. I think that's probably enough on Harry and Lena. I don't know what their religion was. Their kids and grandkids all became Mormons. I don't think Harry and Lena were Mormons. But anyway, Harry was kind of crazy about his property. For example, this widow woman I referred to living where Barnes is now [Ruth Coan], she had a little cabin over there. She had it because he had just let her build a cabin on his land. She had a cow which she was absolutely dependent on for

milk, and she had chickens. He took pity on her and just gave her a 10-acre slice between his place and Ralph and Esther's place, and that's why Doug's place is there, because there was no zoning and no one ever thought about anything like that.

Harry's [adopted] boy Bud [Leonard] never had an interest in the North Fork, so he didn't leave him any land. But an interesting thing, much later he decided he wanted to be up here after all. When Ralph Day was on his death bed—I don't know whether I should tell this or not, but I think it will tell you about someone that I miss that were not homesteaders but wonderful people—Baird and Esther Chrisman, who live up in the area where Larry Wilson lives and near the Foremans, were very close friends, because the Chrismans were also from Illinois and knew the Foremans back there. Baird was a big fertilizer dealer in Illinois in the farm country. The Foremans were close friends with Ralph and Esther Day, too. Actually, Esther told me this story. Anyway, when Ralph was on his deathbed, Baird went to see Ralph and asked if there was anything he could do for him, anything at all, just say it. Ralph said, "Well I'm ashamed to say it, Baird, but I don't have money to pay this hospital bill, and we don't have enough money to bury me, so if you could loan me some money I would appreciate it." Baird said, "Anything you want. I'll write a check." Ralph said, "Well, since I'm probably not going to live anyway, the only way I'll take it—absolutely the only way—is if you will let me sign over the South 40 to you." Baird said, "I don't want your land. Besides that's too much for what you've asked me to lend you." Ralph said, "I won't take any more, and I won't take it if you won't let me sign it over," so he signed it over. Well, Baird didn't want it, so he put it up for sale, and it's been through several hands, but Bud bought it, actually. The guy who didn't want to be up here. When his brother-in-law died and it came on the market, he bought it. That's the kind of thing that happens up here all the time.

Well let's see, moving south, of course there's Ford Station. Ross Wilson, who had owned Kintla Ranch up north, had disposed of it. I don't know where it went—I know that Larry bought some of it back. Ross and what was his wife's name [Louise]. Anyway, they bought I think it may be a quarter [section, south of Ford Station]. It's where [Tom and Betsy] Holycross are now, and they lived in a double-wide down there. Ross had been county sheriff. I may have said that. I don't think there's anything else about them.

Working south, Loyd and Ruth were living in the old Top Hat building. That was a sign off of a dive in Missoula, and someone got it up here and put it on a house. It wasn't on there, of course, with Loyd and Ruth. But Loyd and Ruth finally got enough together to build their big A-frame down on the river.

Debo: At Sondreson Meadow.

Ray: At Sondreson Meadow, which is now Forest Service land; the Forest Service bought that. I should mention that Barbara Lawrence held on to the Wurtz homestead, but finally sold it to the Forest Service, too, so that whole half went to the Forest Service. Loyd and Ruth built their A-frame, and the community got together to build them a barn and actually built it in two days—that was a great event. And they were committed to getting a place for the Hall, so we had another barn-raising, so to speak, for the Hall. But it was not until after Loyd died of Lupus [1985] that the improvement association voted to name it Sondreson Hall.

They were a wonderful couple. He was a logger, and his first sawmill (I expect Burt Edwards has stories like this too)—he had a little jackleg sawmill that he was running. He would just jack up his Model A and put a belt on the wheel that would turn the sawmill, and he would hand feed logs through there, lumber and so on. Well, I didn't know him at the time, but Bill Gallagher in Missoula owned Caterpillar for the whole state of Montana and was a marvelous man, a very generous man. He owned the Kalispell Caterpillar dealership too. He was one of the wealthiest men in Montana. Loyd went in to talk to him about something, and he said, "Have you got a sawmill up here? Can I come up and see it?" And he did. He said, "Loyd I know your reputation. You're a damn fool. Why don't you have a real sawmill up here?" He said, "Lord, I couldn't pay for it." Gallagher said, "I'll back you. You just come down and buy what you want and pay it off," so he did.

When I came up here Loyd had the sawmill on this side of the border, but he was hauling logs out of Canada. That's how different it was. The border was open. In fact, once a year we always drove up to Fernie. I really miss that. That was great, great fun. So, he had a sawmill up there, and then he subsequently had another one. He kept that one going, but he had another one back here on the back Tepee Lake Road. Everybody up here knew that at 4:30 in the morning you were always welcome for breakfast at the Sondreson's mills. Ruth cooked, and they were fabulous, you know. Ruth loved to bake.

Debo: At 4:30 in the morning?

Ray: Yes, that's when they ate. You can imagine when she started to cook. Her biscuits, her flapjacks, her bread—she would use nothing but Montana hard wheat, and when she couldn't get that she would drive to Canada to buy hard wheat up there, because she was a real stickler. They were Scandinavians, Norwegian. They didn't have an accent. But anyway, you would get up there, and there would be hotcakes and ham and bacon, and steak and eggs and hash browns and syrup and jellies of all sorts, and you never paid anything. If you were up moving around in the dark and wanted to eat a real breakfast, you could always stop by the Sondreson's. They were like that with everybody. And he's a guy who would stop his sawmill and go fix your power plant or whatever. He was the Mike Eddy of that day, except that he would never take any money. They were the most loved people up here, I think. I mean, I was such a green horn. I had never seen a pine tree, hardly a tree at all.

Anyway, so we're down to Sondreson's. I guess the next would be Frank and Ethel Newton down on the river. Frank had worked in the Park. I don't know Ethel's background, but they had a homestead down there. I think they homesteaded in 1910. It may be the earliest one that I know about. Maybe the Holcombs were. But when Frank and Ethel got married they didn't have a cabin yet; they had a tent. They got married, got on their horses right after the ceremony, rode across the river and spent two weeks in the Park camping on their honeymoon. Then they rode them back and slowly, from the tent, began building their house on the North Fork.

Frank built his own boat, which was a MacKenzie River keel boat, like that. That's the only thing he would get in the river on. He thought canoes were silly, and rafts in those days—never get in the North Fork River in something that you can't control yourself, one person controlling it, because with two people nobody obeys orders up here. [Laughs]

Let's see, Burt Edwards, that was the old man's name, right? Burt and Thelma. [He was the Park ranger at Logging Creek in the 1950s.]

Debo: Yes, Thelma.

Ray: I bought my first 2' x 4's from Burt, for a nickel apiece. I think I bought 300 of them. I've still got a few of them. They were strong, of course, but can you imagine a nickel apiece for a 10-foot 2' x 4' now? Which were genuine 2' x 4's. Then, of course, Tom was his son. I knew Tom when he was manager of WBC [Western Building Center] in Whitefish.

The old man on the right just before you cross Red Meadow Creek going south. Why am I blanking on his name? [Tacheny] Oh, and I forgot the Ramons, Helen and what was her dad's name, [Milton] Huck. The Association used to meet up there on Sunday afternoons for skeet shoots and things that took place outdoors, with fish fries and dinner on the ground, sort of picnics up there, Helen Huck [Voelker Ramon]. Yes, her father's name was Huck and I think the mailbox may still say Huck on it as you go down.

But I got to that by forgetting the name of the family that lived there at the end of the Cimino property, just over across the road by Red Meadow. I'll try to think to ask Morgan and maybe you can write it down and add it. He has a nephew who still comes up here [Peter Moore]. South of Red Meadow I don't think I knew any homesteaders in that area. As you come to the outskirts of Polebridge, I've already said a little bit about Hazen and Ruth Lawson. And the other one, of course, would be Frank Evans, who I think was not a homesteader, but he was up here as long as a lot of the homesteaders. He knew all of them, absolutely all of them.

And I might say, parenthetically, that really the most precious thing you could get would be a recording that Bob Funk did one night. We did it at the Hall. It was after the Hall was built. He took several bottles of Jim Beam down, and we got all of the then-living homestead men together, and after they were sufficiently liquored up they talked for maybe two or three hours, and Bob recorded that. He is dead now, but his wife has it and I'm going to see if I can get it, because we ought to get that transcribed on a tape or digitally or however this works—probably digital now—and get a typed script made of that, because this was the homesteaders themselves talking about the early days. You can probably tell from that how much of this I've made up. I told it the way I remember it, but that needs to be done.

I should say also, about Bob and Mickey Funk, how heavily they were involved in this community. Bob was then at the University of Montana. See, I came to the University of Montana in 1969. Both Bob and I had places up here before we both went to the University of Montana in Missoula. I was brought there first as a consultant from Vanderbilt to advise them. Then I advised them, and the president called me up and said, "You're so damn smart, why don't you just come do it?" I asked, "Can I bring a colleague and two or three others?" He said, "I was just asking you," and I said, "Yes, I'm telling you my price."

Debo: So, you all got jobs because of that?

Ray: Yes. I got one senior person and two junior persons, and I had a commitment for a PhD program and so on, which was damn foolishness, and the state couldn't deliver on all of it. That's after I got to be a Montanan and understood how poor the state is. [Laughs] It's a great place to

live; it's a hard place to make a living. Anyway, up here Bob fought very long and hard to get wild river status for this river, and he was put on a prestigious commission. I'm sorry I'm not going to come up with his name, but there was a famous ecologist/environmentalist who was at the University and then went on to head some big regional thing about the use of rivers and so on. Anyway, they didn't get wild river status, but they did get wild and scenic, and that would never have happened without Bob Funk. He was really dogged about that, and his name should be remembered for that, if for nothing else.

Debo: Definitely. But that caused a little controversy up here.

Ray: Of course, of course. We have all kinds of people up here who didn't want a thing changed, but they didn't want anyone telling them what to do with their land, you know. Well, you can't. Things are going to change unless there's some restrictions on changing things. It just comes down to that; that's all there is to it. You had the predecessor of property rights people up here from the get-go, and that just meant they were old-timers, and nobody had ever told them what they were going to do, and they weren't going to start now letting somebody tell them what to do. Well, if we don't all agree on this, then anybody can do anything. Well, you've just got to make sure you get the right people up here then, boy. And they did, and they could do that for a while, but then you can't do that forever. That's all there is to it.

Tom Ladenburg was one of those kind of guys. Now, he did wonderful things with his land, and since I was on opposite sides with him on every zoning issue, I went up to him one night after a zoning meeting in Kalispell and said, "Tom I just want you to know we've had our differences, but I think you did a wonderful thing for the North Fork in putting your land with the Nature Conservancy. He said, "I didn't do it for the people up here. I don't give a good God damn about anybody up here; I did it for my elk!" And that's okay.

Debo: That's okay. He did it for his elk.

Ray: He fed more hay to the elk than he did his cows, because he loved them and he wanted them to have a place to come across from the Park, which wasn't elk season. And I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't stipulate that whoever owns the place now had to feed the elk, because that's the way he felt about it.

Okay, let's see. Frank Evans was a very dear friend, and it blew me away when he blew himself away [committed suicide in 1982]. I think he's the one up here who created the "attitude adjustment hour." He would show up every other day with a half-gallon of gin and say, "How is your attitude? Let's work on it."

Debo: [Laughs]

Ray: Ted Ross. I knew everyone who owned the store from the time I was here, and it's gone up, it's gone down. It's on an upswing now. I was too late for the Adairs. Ann Hensen, you knew her?

Debo: I did.

Ray: You know, I don't remember her husband at all [Ben Hensen, Jr.]. I don't think she talked about him. [Laughs] Maybe that's why I don't remember. Was there anyone else on The Loop, the inner loop? I can't remember. There's several houses in there. [Del and Linda Coolidge]

Debo: So, when you started coming up here it was mostly in the summertime?

Ray: Yes.

Debo: You brought your whole family?

Ray: Yes, yes.

Debo: You fished and hiked?

Ray: You know, one of my major reasons for coming to Montana was so I could spend my summers up here. I came up in 1967, 1968; I came up before I got moved to Montana. In fact, when I was called and asked to be a consultant I happened to be at the store when the call came through. It was a Professor Bugby at the University of Montana. He said the faculty senate had set up a special committee to look into whether or not the university was acquitting its responsibilities in the academic study of religion, and would I come and advise them. I said, "Well, I'm favorably disposed, but I'm really sorry to have to ask this question. Where is the University of Montana?" He said, "Oh, it's in Missoula." I said, "Well, I drive through there every year when I come up to my place on the North Fork," so I knew where it was once I found it out. [Laughs] I felt a little foolish about that.

See, I thought I would spend more time here on the North Fork, May to late September, because the University then was on the quarter system. But the truth is, I couldn't spend as much time as when I came from Vanderbilt because there wasn't a phone up here, except the Forest Service phones. Mail delivery was two days a week, same as it is now, and you didn't have the Internet or anything like that. At Vanderbilt they just assumed they couldn't get in touch with me, so they didn't even try. Well, Montana would close up if it was assumed that you couldn't get in touch with anybody because they were at the cabin, because everybody had a cabin and so people knew how to find you, and they did find me. So, yes, we moved up. And if I had to go away for a few days, why Fern and the kids would stay here. Yes, the kids grew up here. And then Fern got involved in politics in Missoula, and so on.

Fern hasn't come up much since she got involved in government. You know, she was first treasurer-county clerk and then became a commissioner, so for 25 years she would come up on holidays, like the 4th of July. And, of course, it's only recently that I've been able to be up here in the fall.

Debo: When you were up here in the summertime with your family, how was your life different up here than it was back in civilization?

Ray: Well, unlike now, the boys and I, of course, had a garden. You will not believe this, and I don't believe it either except that it's true, I gardened up here for 20 years without a fence. Rabbits, gophers, nothing. The only bother I had was when Barbara Lawrence's horses would get out and would want to come down and tromp in my garden, that's it. The other thing was

there was very little game here. I never saw a bear when we were in the old cabin. Of course, all this up here where I live now, we never came up here. A lot of it was under water, because the beavers had diverted the creek back in here. It was just a mass of grass and so on, so we never came up here. We rarely ever saw a deer. The comeback in wildlife in the past 20 years has been amazing, as the decline in fishing has. The boys and I fished every day. I usually would try to work at my desk until 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, then we would fish until dark every evening.

And weekends you always went to the Hall. We had a square dance. Business meetings, I don't know why we had business meetings. There really wasn't anything to do, and I was president one year. In those days the president also had the title—I think it was mostly a joke—Mayor of Polebridge, which I have on my CV [curriculum vitae].

Debo: The president was the Mayor of Polebridge?

Ray: Yes. I had that on CV, and everybody was so impressed with that in the academic world. You're a professor and you were Mayor of Polebridge, Montana—now that's something nobody gets. Yes, you don't want it either! For the kids, I think the most important thing was square dancing. And there were a lot of kids up here then. That's another thing that I've missed. I'm glad to see some babies up here now and some younger kids.

Oh, I forgot Paul and what's her name [Maxine] Maas up north. Their daughter is up here now.

Debo: Karen McDonough.

Ray: Karen McDonough, exactly. Square dancing was very important to Paul and Maxine.

Debo: Was it every week?

Ray: It was very nearly every week. You know how those old records have survived? They must have been played a million times. The square dances were being held before the Hall was built. As I said, they would move around, usually to someone's who had a big barn, or the McFarland Ranch which was a dude ranch, so they had large areas that would accommodate a number of people.

The square dance, the skeet shoots, the midday potluck dinner on the ground parties, occasional fish fries. If there was a fishing limit, I don't know what it was. People would just bring what they caught that day or the day before, and you would have a trout fry.

Debo: So, there were a lot of fish here.

Ray: There was a lot of fish.

Debo: But not much game.

Ray: Not much game, no. You know, you didn't see hunters up here in the fall. People didn't come up from town. I think there just wasn't the game here. The same thing has happened, of course, in the eastern part of the United States. Now there's so many deer in the East that they are pests, they're dangerous. And Missoula is a remarkable story. Missoula was—well, you had

tepee burners all over the place. It smelled like rotten eggs. You couldn't fish in the river. The river ran red. The Clark Fork is now cleaned up. There are deer all over Missoula. We have bears in Missoula eating apples and getting into garbage cans, bobcats, wild turkeys and so on. The whole game situation has just totally changed, and it's all for the better.

Debo: Yes. But really, there were no ground squirrels in your garden?

Ray: No, I never saw one. Where were they? I guess the coyotes were getting them. I think you have to build a garden so the Columbian ground squirrels have got something to eat. [Laughs] Some things change for the better, and a lot of things change for the worse. I can't remember anyone ever discussing paving the road, even discussing it.

Debo: Really?

Ray: No. It never came up in the North Fork Improvement Association meetings, never came up. No one was for it, so nobody had to be against it. It just didn't occur to anybody. Why would you want the road paved? That was part of the charm of the place, and it keeps the flatlanders out. [Laughs]

Debo: There have been a number of fires up here.

Ray: Lordy yes. I'm not sure I can identify them all. I think the first one I remember was the 1967 fire that was worst around Camas Creek. I remember there was a big fuss that went on for two weeks between the Park Service and the Forest Service. My recollection is that it started on the Forest Service side, jumped the river, and the worst part of it was in the Park. Then it was threatening to come back. Loyd was checking in every day with the Park Service and the Forest Service. He would call the Park Service, and they would say, "It started in the Forest Service. It's their responsibility to put it out." "But it's threatening to come back over here, and we've got a wind coming out of the south and it's going to come up and burn us up." "Well." He would talk to the Forest Service and they would say, "Well the Park's got to do something about it." After two weeks Loyd just fired up his D6 CAT and went down and put the bastard out. This infuriated the Park, so they came over with a big bill, and he had to go and cover up all of his scar tracks and all that stuff, and he said, "If you do that, buddy, I'm going to sue you, not only for legal expenses, but for the hours and equipment expense I spent putting out your goddamn fire." Loyd didn't mess with people.

So, that's what I remember from the 1967 fire. After that I don't know. The Red Bench Fire that was in 1988, I was the last one to leave the North Fork, because I didn't know it was happening. It was about this time of day. I was around there painting sash on core. We didn't have windows in it, but we had plastic over it, and I was painting the sash. Elliot drove up and came around and said, "What are you doing? Are you trying to paint this place before it burns down?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Have you been around to the other side of the building?" Well he took me around, and I could see this wall of smoke back there. He said, "It's down by Red Meadow Creek. It's coming this way, and everything is closed. The road is closed, Red Meadow is closed, the North Fork Road is closed. Your only way out is Trail Creek, and you get your ass out of here. We're out now." So he turned and left.

Well, I got to thinking about that, and I thought well no, what about the old cabin down there? So I went down and turned the pump on. I was pumping out of the creek, and I began hosing down the old cabin, because it had large, cedar shingles on it, split shakes and so on. I hosed it all down, and by nightfall I could see above this hill 200 feet of flames down there. So, I decided I'd better get out. I drove up to Trail Creek. It brings you out just south of Eureka. It's the longest road from there to Kalispell. I got to Kalispell about 2:30 in the morning, having left here about 10:00. I was exhausted, so I rented a motel and went to bed. I didn't call Fern, a damn fool. Meanwhile Bracken, who always shows up in an emergency, had come to Missoula and no one had heard from me, so he said, "I'm going to go find him," and he headed north. He got to the roadblock and talked his way through the Forest Service people. He got up here and didn't find me, and then really got worried. So, then he went back down and helped fight the fire. He works in the woods all the time anyway. He fought the fire, and finally after I got to Missoula and got Fern quieted down, we got word up to the Forest Service to find our son and tell him that I was alive, if not well. [Laughs]

That's the Red Bench Fire. During the Wedge Canyon Fire, the kids and I were on a horseback backpack trip into the Bob Marshall. The fire had started before we left. But come on, it was 15 miles away and it was an acre or something like that. We've got a week, at least. Yeah. So those are the fires. There were other smaller fires, but those three I remember—1967, 1988, 2003. Those are the ones that stick out. Of course, I wasn't up here when some of the fires were going, because I was in Missoula.

Debo: Well, I think we should put a stop to it right now.

Ray: I think we should, too.

Debo: Okay. Thank you for your time.