Richard Hildner Oral History Interview

November 3, 2012

Debo: My name is Debo Powers and today is November 3, 2012. I'm interviewing for the first time Richard Hildner. This interview is taking place at 350 Moose Creek Road, Polebridge, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So, Richard tell us a little bit about your early background, where you were born.

Richard: Well, I was born in Jacksonville, Illinois, and I came to the North Fork in 1958 as a 12-year-old boy. I came with the Foremans, Helen and Orville Foreman. Their children were grown, and I think they needed and wanted somebody to help chop wood and split kindling and do errands and things around the place. I was steeped in North Fork lore long before I came to the North Fork, and that's how I got here, as their guest.

Debo: Lucky for you. Lucky for the North Fork, too. When you first came as a 12- year-old boy what were some of your earliest memories?

Richard: My first memories were that we stopped…. Helen Foreman had a blue three-ring notebook. We drove out from Illinois, and in the last 24 hours of the driving, I suppose, or the last day of driving, Helen pulled out her North Fork notebook and began going through the checklist and putting together the grocery list of what we needed for one week of groceries and any supplies that we might need. I remember going to the B&B grocery in Kalispell and picking up those groceries. It included a slab of bacon, a whole side of bacon, uncut with the rind still on it, and I thought, "Wow, I've never seen one of these before." We had no refrigeration in those days at the Foreman Ranch, which is called the Sawtooth Ranch. Orville would, in the morning, send me down into the root cellar of the original homestead cabin, Emil Peterson's homestead cabin. I would pull down a cloth flour sack in which this slab of bacon would hang. I would bring it up, and Orville would figure out how many people had to be fed. He would slice off that many slices of side bacon. He always saved a piece of the rind that had some fat on it to grease the griddle for his pancakes. He was always very proud of his pancakes. He always made breakfast up here. So, that was one of my early memories, and the other thing I remember is one day I went down and pulled down this sack, and I brought the bacon up and it had some mold on it. I said, "Oh, it's all moldy," and Helen said, "That's not a problem." She grabbed that bacon and slathered it with vinegar and scrubbed it with a brush. It was as good as new, and we had fresh bacon, and that's the way it was.

Debo: [Laughs] Well, I bet your life up in the North Fork was really different from where you lived the rest of the year. What were the differences?

Richard: Well, I came to the mountains. Illinois is as flat as one of Orville Foreman's pancakes. You could see into the next century or back to the last one from that part of Illinois, central Illinois. To come to the mountains as a 12-year-old, I had already been reading about Daniel Boone and all those sorts of characters, and that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a mountain man, and I wanted to live in the woods. When we got here the whole process was you had to set up camp. In other words, you had to get the place operational, and that required several days.

The water pump from the spring seemed like it never worked the first time, and it required trips up and down the hill to find out where the leaks were in the pipes and why the pump wasn't pumping and who'd lost the prime, and one thing after another. This went on for days. Every day I would bug Orville and say, "Uncle Orville…" They had asked me to start calling them aunt and uncle, so it was Uncle Orville and Aunt Helen from that year on, but I would bug Orville every day, "So, when are we going trout fishing? When are we going trout fishing?" He would say, "After we get things set up, after we get the electricity, after we get the water, after this and after that." And I always kept asking, "When are we going fishing?"

About the third or the fourth day we had to go down to—their cabin is up on the bench, the homestead cabin was on the bench—and we had to go down a quarter or half mile to the river, and it's a steep climb down into there. The river doesn't cross there anymore, but Orville said—the river came up against a log jam, and he said, "Throw a fly right out there," and I threw a fly out there. I had never fly-fished before. A fish came roaring out of there and went right over the top of my fly. I screamed and hooted and hollered and missed it. That happened in succession time after time, and Orville was beside himself with laughter. I think it gave him as much joy watching me miss fish. I don't miss as many now as I did then, but that was an early time. And when the pump didn't work, what we had to do was take what Orville called GI cans, but they were garbage cans, and we would load two garbage cans in the back of the jeep. We would drive down to the Trail Creek bridge and throw a bucket over the edge of the bridge into the creek and then haul the bucket up and pour buckets of water into these big garbage cans. That's what we had for drinking water until we got the pump going.

Debo: Wow.

Richard: Those are early memories, it was such wild country. It was wild, wild country. And the road was just a narrow—it was dirt from the time you crossed the railroad tracks. You didn't go over the railroad tracks in Columbia Falls [on the viaduct]. You crossed the railroad tracks in Columbia Falls and headed north, and that's where the pavement ended and the dirt started, and it was narrow and windy and just a great wild place.

Debo: That's great. Did you know any of the original homesteaders?

Richard: Yes, I did actually. I knew Harry and Lena Holcomb. Many people called them Ma and Pa Holcomb. They were one of my first and earliest memories of the homesteaders. The Wurtz's were still on their property when I arrived. Ollie and Madge Terrian were still there. Though Ollie wasn't a homesteader, he certainly had built his reputation, and it was well deserved and earned, I think, as was Madge's. Ralph and Esther Day were still here. Early on, Ralph had carried the mail. He brought the mail over from Belton, from West Glacier, on the old Inside Road to Polebridge, then he drove it north from Polebridge and delivered the mail. Ted Ross had the Mercantile, and then Fred Boss drove the mail when I was here. The mail was as it is even today. Mail day was an exciting day. For us it was to drive out to the mailbox; it's about a mile from the Foreman's place out to the road, and we would often try to be there to meet the mail. While we waited for the mail Helen would be busy writing notes and letters to people and making sure that they got in the mail. Fred would come by, and we would have a little conversation. Oftentimes what we would do was leave a shopping list for him, some things that we really needed, like fresh milk, and he would go shopping. You would give him a brief shopping list, and he would shop for everybody up and down the North Fork. You wanted to be

there when he delivered the next time, because you didn't want the fresh food sitting there for the bears. But that was what I remember.

Debo: [Laughs]

Richard: Then Helen would quickly tear into the mail before she left the mailbox to see if there was anything that urgently had to be addressed before driving the mail back to the cabin.

Debo: That's great. You got a big grin on your face when you talked about Ollie and Madge. Do you know stories about them?

Richard: Well, yes, I do actually. You were at dinner the other night, and I was telling about Madge and her Pontiac automobile. They lived on the border, as I think most people know, and she had gone to town. As she recounted the story, she had gone to town because she had to get some live chickens, and she also needed to get some parts. The place she said she always got parts was the junkyard, because you could find more Pontiacs in the junkyard than you could at the dealership. So, she had gone to town and was returning late in the evening. Madge was only about 4'10" tall, maybe 4'11", certainly well under 5 feet, and when you saw Madge coming down the road in one of those Pontiac automobiles you weren't sure if there was anybody driving, because she couldn't see over the steering wheel; she looked through the steering wheel. What had happened on this occasion was that she approaching her place. She had to come around a hairpin turn coming into Colt's Creek, came down the hill and made a right-hand turn around that sharp bend. She said she lost her steering and went down into Colt's Creek. When she did, of course, the chickens all escaped. She just left the Pontiac right there in the creek. She walked back and told Ollie what had happened, and they decided nothing could happen until morning. The next morning they came back and, sure enough, the Pontiac was still there and the chickens were still roosting in the back of the car.

Debo: [Laughs]

Richard: She was diminutive in her height, but not diminutive in her stature, if you understand what I mean.

Debo: Yes.

Richard: She had this penetrating look. For a 12 or 13-year-old boy, sometimes I felt a little frightened of her, because I'd never met anybody quite like her. She wore men's clothing. She wore these boots and flannel shirts. And Ollie was probably 5'8" tall, and wiry. He wasn't terribly strong, as somebody who has been lifting weights half their life, but I remember his biceps were just these big huge bulges right there on his arm, and he had this awful dog. He had the meanest dog I have ever known. His name was Cola, and he was a black German Shepherd, and it was crossed with mean. Every once in a while I had to ride with Ollie, because part of one summer we picked rock up Trail Creek, up above Tuchuck, for the Foreman's fireplace, because they were building a new, larger cabin. When I would get in Ollie's pick-up truck, his Jeep pick-up, that dog rode in the back, but he didn't like anybody else riding in the truck. Every single time Ollie would yell, "You son of a bitch!" He would yell at the dog, and then he would pick up a stick. Before he could pick up that stick the dog would bite my shoulder just as I got into the truck. I hated that dog. It was the vilest dog I have ever met in my wife. I like dogs, but I did not like Cola.

But Ollie and I worked together. I remember once Ollie and I had a confrontation. We were loading sand for mixing mortar for the stonework in the Foreman's fireplace. We had two shovels. One had a very small blade, and then there was a standard sized shovel. I picked up the big shovel, and he said, "No, you use this little one." I said, "I'm not using any little shovel," and he and I had a face-off right there. I ended up using the little shovel. [Laughs] But that was Ollie. He didn't have a tooth in his head. That's why I think he loved coming to Helen Foreman's kitchen. Before they built the big cabin she had a big Monarch [woodstove], still has it, but it's in the newer cabin now, the one I helped build in 1962. But she always had a pot of soup on the back of that stove. Anything that was left over got thrown in that pot of stew or soup or whatever it was called. If somebody showed up, she would just start throwing water in it until there was enough to go around. I think Ollie liked that because he didn't have to chew anything. When he would stop for dinner he was pretty clever about showing up at mealtimes. That was after Madge had died. And if there was a piece of meat Helen or Orville would say, "You want any help with that?" And he said, "No, I'll just gum it for a while."

And he rolled his own cigarettes. I thought that was pretty fascinating. I'd never met anybody that rolled their own cigarettes. He would just sit there and pull out a bag of Bull Durham and twist them up. This toothless mouth would just gum his cigarettes, and I was captivated by it. Well, he got thrown off the place after Madge died, and one day he said, "Richard I need to go up and get my traps, do you want to come with me?" I just thought trapping was the end-all, and I had read everything I could about trapping. I had never trapped anything other than a gopher. And I almost made a big mistake. We loaded the back of his Jeep with traps, beaver traps. I mean this thing was heaped high with beaver traps, and they all looked like they were rusty and needed to be polished up. I mean I couldn't believe that there would be a trap in such bad condition, for a guy who was noted up here as a trapper. The Foreman's had given Ollie permission and encouraged him to live at their homestead cabin on Mud Lake, and as we were unloading those traps into the barn I said, "Do you want me to oil those?" And he said, "Don't you dare!" because the oil would have left human scent on them. They were all scented up just the way he wanted him. [Laughs] Oh boy, that was almost a big screw-up.

Debo: So, it sounds like you knew them pretty well. How about some of the other homesteaders?

Richard: Well, as I said I knew Harry and Lena Holcomb, because the Foremans always checked in with the Holcolms. Orville was always willing to help people with their legal work, although he wasn't licensed to practice law in Montana. I guess I didn't mention he was an attorney in Jacksonville, Illinois, and actually was in practice with L.O. Vaught of Mount Vaught in Glacier National Park. Mount Vaught is named after him. So, we would stop in frequently at the Holcombs and have a cup of coffee. I remember Harry, after Lena poured a cup of coffee, if somebody reached for the sugar he would say, "Go easy on that, we have to buy that," because they grew and raised most of what they needed. They were pretty self-sufficient on their homestead. They were getting on in years when I first arrived, but they were classic American Gothic. I mean, I could almost see them if I used my imagination, holding a pitchfork. Lena had that caricature of, you know, when you carve a person's face into an apple and it dries up? Well, that's the way it was, both of them, and Harry had these really thick glasses. He couldn't see very well at all. He wore blue bib overalls and just had a nice slow way of talking, and you could just sit there for hours.

Lena—I was thinking about this a little bit. I can remember once Orville showed up and he said, "Lena, I brought you a present." She just giggled and said, "Oh yeah, what did you bring me?" He said he had brought her some toilet water. This was an eau de cologne sort of thing, but toilet water, and it was in a vessel that was the shape of a toilet. [Laughs] He said, "Lena, I wanted you to have this," and Lena just giggled and giggled and giggled. She couldn't get over that Orville had brought her some toilet water in a toilet bowl.

Debo: There were really some characters up here.

Richard: Oh, there were. I remember the Foremans needed some kerosene, so we stopped at the Holcombs and said, "Can I get a gallon of kerosene from you?" Harry said, "Yeah, there's some in one of those wooden barn shed structures out back." So, we went out there and that's how I learned to siphon without having to suck the gas or oil or kerosene out. He just reached over and grabbed the section of hose and stuck the hose down in this 55-gallon drum, all way down in there. Just before he pulled the hose out, he put his thumb over it and pulled it out real fast and then tipped it way down, and that created the siphon, and he didn't get a mouthful of kerosene at all. I thought, "Wow, this is really cool." I've used one of those kinds of credit cards since, and it really works.

Debo: That's great.

Richard: The Wurtz's would sew in the winter time. A lot of people would drop off their hides, deer and elk. If you left them a green hide, they would give you a pair of gloves they had made the winter before in exchange. Orville had a jacket—he had killed an elk and took the hide to the Wurtz's and they made him an elk hide jacket out of that. They had to add a bit of somebody else's hide, I suppose, but they were interesting people. I didn't know them well, but I remember stopping every once in a while on our way through.

Debo: How did the Foremans end up with a homestead piece in the North Fork?

Richard: Mr. L. O. Vaught came to Glacier Park before it was a park to hike and to hunt. He was an attorney, and he believed that you should be able to get your work done in ten months of the year and have two months to recreate, to vacation. He came out as a guest of the railroad. In those days Mr. Kelly had a homestead at the head of Lake McDonald that became known as Kelly's Camp. A buckboard would meet them at the Belton train station and take them up to Sprague Creek on the lake or on up to Kelly's. That's how Mr. Vaught came to this country, and then he brought his niece, Helen Foreman—Helen Cleary before she married Orville. So, as a young woman Helen had walked through this country with her uncle.

Then when she and Orville were married they came to spend time at Kelly's Camp, but they spent most of their time at Upper Quartz Lake. They would be packed in and spend all summer at Upper Quartz. Then Orville was in the Marine Corps in the Pacific, and after the war they came back to the Park and said it was time to start looking around, because the Park was going to get crowded. They looked for property and discovered that Ed Peterson had his deceased brother's homestead for sale. They couldn't afford all of it, so Helen and her brother Ed split that homestead, and they bought the Emil Peterson homestead. Then when Ed Peterson had to sell up and go, as I understand it, to the VA home to live out the rest of his days, he offered his homestead to Helen and Orville.

He liked the way that they had taken care of it and offered it to them. That must have been in the early 1950s, maybe as late as 1954. I don't know exactly when that transaction took place, but that's how the Foremans came into that piece of property. It has been in their family ever since, and I'm just really lucky that the family—the Foremans had three children, Connie, Peggy and Mike, Peggy being the oldest—they've kept me in the loop. Connie died many years ago, but Peggy and I still carry on quite a conversation. I help manage their property and take care of it when they're not there, so I'm really, really lucky with that.

Debo: Yes. You told me that they bought the property for some outrageous amount of money.

Richard: Yes. Two years ago I was contacted by Ed Peterson's grandnephew. Carl [Mellum?] is his name. Just out of the blue he made an inquiry on the North Fork and somebody said, "Well, talk to Richard Hildner because he knows all about the Foreman property." Carl came out and brought some old pictures of Ed Peterson's homestead, and we got to talking. He said, "You might be interested in this letter." Here was a letter that Ed Peterson had written to his family back in Michigan. Ed was one of three brothers—Ed, Axel, and Emil—and all three of them homesteaded up here. All three were bachelors. But Ed said, "I'm going to try and sell Emil's place. The appraiser says one price." He said, "I think I can do better than that. I think I can get $10 an acre for it." As far as I know, that's what he got, $10 an acre for that piece of property.

Debo: Not bad. [Laughs]

Richard: No. It would have been a pretty good deal. But you know it's funny, so many times you look at a piece of property you woulda, coulda, shoulda, and it sold for such and such, I could have bought it for such and such, but then nobody had any money. And now nobody has the kind of money it takes to buy a big piece now. That's kind of the way it is. Also, I should tell you I got a chance to work for a number of years with a couple of other people in the summer time. One was Austin Weikert. Austin was an early homesteader up here. His father had guided parties through the Yellowstone in the days when they had to still worry about attacks by Native Americans. But Austin was an artist with an axe. I have never seen anybody wield an axe with such skill and dexterity.

I remember when we were building what the Foremans called their New Main home, as opposed to the old original homestead cabin which they called Old Main, and we needed a beam to fit underneath. We were getting ready to set flooring, and Austin said, "How long is it going to take to get timber brought up from town?" Orville said, "Well, I can drive to Polebridge and make the telephone call, and we can probably get a truck to bring it up in a couple of days, two or three days." Austin said, "Oh, I don't have that kind of time." We had some lodgepole pine logs, house logs all decked up, and he got out his log dogs, angled pieces of steel to hold the log from rolling. He got out a chalk line, snapped a chalk line, pulled out his broad axe, and in less than an hour he had a beautiful hand-hewn beam that's now buried in the bowels of the cabin. Nobody will ever see it. But I was in awe! And when he would notch the logs, he had a three-quarter size cruiser's axe. He had modified that cruiser's axe so that it had a bit of a curve. He had heated it and shaped it somehow so it had a little bit of a curve, so when he would swing that axe it would come down and start to make a scooping motion. Then he would flip his axe over and slice on the other side. And boom-boom-boom, he had a notch. Then he would flip the log over to see how it fit.

He would re-scribe it. He had another little deal, it was a piece of spring steel from a car, a leaf spring, and he had made two little ears on it. He had sharpened the ears, so that once he had the log in place he could run it alongside the length of the log and score it. It would scribe it, and he could see where he had to dish it out. Then he would make a channel for the log that was coming in to sit on the log that was already in place. And they would fit just as closely as you could put your two index fingers one on top of the other. It was just absolutely beautiful. It required almost no chinking at all. He just had all kinds of things. The way we brought up the logs was just like a mast and a boom. It was a gin pole type thing. We would bring the logs in and crank it up with a block and tackle and swing it around into place, and the logs went up.

Walt Hammer built the fireplace. It's a massive fireplace. I think the heatilator on the living room side is five feet across, so it burns big wood. Almost one entire summer—well, when I wasn't fighting Cola, Ollie's dog—we hauled rock for that fireplace, and I would just mix mortar. Walt would say, "More mortar!" and I would start mixing mortar, and then he would say, "I need more rock," and I would keep a pile of rock in front of him as he worked. Then, if he didn't like the rocks I brought into the building, he would go out—we had a huge monster rock pile—and he would poke around and say, "I like this one." He didn't say ten words in a working day, other than, "More mortar." If he said that five times, that was ten words and that pretty much took care of it. He was just very laconic and quiet. But he was an artisan, as well. It's just a beautiful fireplace, and it was fun to watch all that come together.

I would putter around when I didn't have anything to do. The next year after that, the Chrismans were building a cabin, and Walt Hammer did that work. The Chrismans had asked Walt, I think that's the way it worked, "You need a helper?" or, "You want Richard Hildner?" and he said, "Yeah, I can work with Richard." I think it's maybe because I kept my mouth shut for once. But Walt and I worked all one summer on the Chrisman's cabin. It was a completely different way of laying up the logs that Walt used. But what was fun for me was both of those guys, Austin and Walt. Sometimes they would just sit with their legs crossed and their arms folded, and they would just look at the work that they had done, and they would get almost trance-like, it seemed to me, as I think about it, and then they would get up and go to work. They had figured out what they were going to do next, and then they would go to work at it. Then pretty soon sometimes they would just sit and have a cup of coffee.

The other thing I remember about Austin is that he liked Helen Foreman's cooking, too. Everybody liked Helen's cooking. But we didn't have any hot or cold running water, so if you wanted hot water, you had to heat it up on the stove. Every two or three days, Austin would shave, and I had never watched anybody shave with a straight razor before. I was just fascinated. He would sit there, and he would get out the straight razor, and he would strop it four or five times. He would have his face all lathered up, and here was this blade going across his chin, and I thought, "Oh, he's going to kill himself. He's going to slice his neck." So, I asked him once, "Have you ever cut yourself?" And he said, "I gave myself a pretty good knick once when I swatted a fly when I had the razor in my hand." I said, "Oh, I bet you did." But Austin, he was a character. He drove these Hudson Hornets. He had two of them, I think, and one of them was probably just for spare parts. But every once in a while it would run, and all of his tools were in the back of it. I think everything he owned in terms of tools were there. He had all these just nifty little things. Oh yeah, he would figure things out.

Debo: So as a young person in the North Fork, it sounds like you did a lot of work, but what about social life? Was there any social life up here?

Richard: Oh, there was social life, yeah. Ruth Sondreson taught me how to square dance at the Hall. I remember that distinctly. We would come down to the Hall. I think the dances, at least in my memory, were much more frequent than they are now. Sometimes there would be a caller, and sometimes there would be records. But we would have probably four or five squares going at any one time. Ruth, I remember she just grabbed me one time. I was wanting to dance but didn't know the first thing about it, and I had two left feet. She just brought me right out there, and she would swing me around. And she could swing you around, there was no question about it. I thought that was pretty neat stuff, and people would dance. Then they would break at about 11:00 o'clock at night for lunch. There would be a big spread out on that big counter, and everybody would eat. Then they would dance for a little bit longer, and then everybody would just disappear back into the woods.

I would sit on those benches next to the Holcombs. The Funks were there, all of these old-timers. The Hensens were there. It was just a magical, magical time for a 12-year-old kid, 13-14-15. I wasn't here the summer I turned 16. I was off in Europe. My father was a college professor, a college dean, and he was on a sabbatical, so I didn't come in 1962. But every summer then until I started smoke jumping in 1967, I was here. But it's always been a place of the heart. Those were the social activities. The 4th of July was a big deal. There was no parade, but sometimes a big picnic down at Sondreson airstrip. Loyd and Ruth, when I first met them, had the old Top Hat house that Ray Hart talks about. That's where they had their logging business. That was the business end of the operation.

Ruth's dad, Charlie Durdel, was an interesting character. Charlie had made his livelihood moving grain elevators. Now think about what it's like to move a wooden, however-many-story grain elevator from one place to another. That was quite a skill, because we raised two of the original homestead cabins at the Foreman property and put new rounds of logs underneath them. Charlie was the main push on raising those buildings. I remember Charlie at the Foreman's lake cabin. We had the floor all ripped out, so you were having to climb over the log stringers, and we were headed toward the door. He was a crusty kind of a guy, and I was 12 years old, and I had been taught to respect my elders. We both got to the door at the same time, and I said, "Go ahead, sir." He looked at me with fire in his eyes and said, "How would you like to be called a gourd head?" I just shriveled and shrank and said, "I didn't call you a gourd head!" He just burst into laughter, and from then on he called me Gourd Head. But he was a trickster. I had dinner once at the Sondresons. They had invited me to stay, and we ate family-style, just like you did in a logging camp. Here was all this food on the table, and there was this big thing of mashed potatoes right in front of me. Charlie must have known that, because he said, "Here, hand me that…" whatever it was, and just as I handed it to him he said, "Oh!" like he was going to drop it, and of course I dropped the back of my hand right into that bowl of mashed potatoes, and he just howled. He just thought that was the funniest thing that I had stuck my hand in the mashed potatoes. But, the corner cabinet in the Foreman cabin, Charlie made that for them, just as a gift.

Debo: It's still there?

Richard: It's still there. Yes, it's their little china cabinet that's in the corner.

Debo: That's great.

Richard: And I knew Ralph Thayer. When I was working for the Chrismans they needed to build a new road that kind of comes in across and in front of Larry Wilson's place, and they needed to know where those lines were. Ralph Thayer had run most of the lines in this country, and his survey is the legal survey. One day he said, "I need a stick man." I didn't know what a stick man was, but I quickly learned. He would set up his staff compass, and I would walk out with a metal chain, and we would chain off, and then he would say, "Stick!" I had these pins, and when it lined up just the way he wanted it, he would say, "Stick!" and I'd yell, "Stuck!" and that meant that the marker was in place. Then, we would measure how many links of chain we had taken out, or whether or not we went a full chain, and pretty soon we got to a corner, and he said, "Well, here's the corner." And I said, "Okay." He said, "What's your initials?" I said "RH, Richard Hildner." He said, "You don't have a middle name?" I said, "Well yeah, it's Smith." He said, "Well, then, that's what we put on the corner. We put RSH." And so somewhere out there is probably a RLT for Ralph L. Thayer and then RSH for Richard Smith Hildner. I've since found some corners on the Foreman property that were run by Ralph Thayer. He did the survey when the Foremans bought that property, and his helper then was Harry Holcomb, but Harry must not have had a middle name, because you see RLT and HH for Harry Holcomb when you find those corners. Ralph was bald as a cue ball, and he had this, I want to say, pinched countenance, but he just had a twinkle in his blue eyes that was infectious. He was a slim, trim fellow, even in his 80s, and could still get through the trees and through the timber and through the woods—it was just an amazing feat to watch him go along.

A story he told to me was about the time that he was cruising timber, and he stepped over a pile of logs. The pile of logs moved, and he realized it wasn't a log but a grizzly bear that he had just stepped on, at which point he shinnied up a tree. He had dropped his axe and shinnied up the tree. The bear shook the tree, and he realized that there was going to be a confrontation between the two of them. So, Ralph shinnied down the tree, and the bear meantime, I think had chewed on his foot. So, things weren't going well for Ralph. He picked up his axe and smacked that bear with the flat side of his axe, right across the nose, and the bear turned tail and ran away. Then, Ralph walked out. He walked with a limp, but not because of that. The reason he walked with a limp was because he was coming up from town in the winter, and a logging truck going down passed him. He got too far to the edge, and he went down off a snow bank and spent the night wrecked in his car. He had broken his leg, and it wasn't until the next day that he was able to crawl back up to the edge of the road. I think it was that broken leg that caused him to walk with a little bit of a limp.

He married a gal when he was in his 80s, and she was maybe in her late 80s. I think that was probably the last chivaree that was ever held on the North Fork. I don't know if you know what a chivaree is, but when folks got married up here all the neighbors would turn out in the dark, and they would surround the person's cabin with pots and pans and wooden spoons, and they would dance all the way around the cabin, banging on the pots and pans. When Ralph got remarried, they had a big chivaree for him. I don't remember his wife's name [Jessie].

After the Red Bench fire, I came up and visited with Ruth, because I had been on the fire. I asked Ruth about winter time and her and Loyd's logging operation. She told me a story about, I think they must have been up Whale Creek. I don't remember them ever hauling logs out, but they sawed logs into boards, and they hauled boards out. They had a mill that I think it must have

been up Whale Creek in the 1950s, and they had been up all winter long, Loyd and Ruth and Jack Mathison. Maybe Jack's wife Nonie was there, too. And they were running real low on diesel. They knew that they were going to have to come out and get more diesel, but the only way to get out was on a big sled that they hooked on behind their D9 tractor-bulldozer with some cables. They put the empty barrels on the sled, but one barrel still had diesel in it, so they could keep refilling the CAT as they came down the road. They slid these barrels on the sled all the way out the Whale Creek Road down to Polebridge. Jack Mathison led in front with a rifle, in case they encountered a moose stuck in the road and they would have to dispatch the moose. But just the fact that they had to sled all those empty diesel barrels out, with somebody riding shotgun. It was quite a story. Ruth not only kept the books, but she also drove a logging truck. I don't know if it's a figment of my imagination or what, but somehow I recall that there was no door on their logging truck on the driver's side. I asked Ruth about that once, and she said, "Oh that's just so I can jump out if I lose control." I don't know if that was true, or that's just something that's in my imagination.

Debo: [Laughs]

Richard: Fishing was pretty good, and there was a ten-fish limit on the North Fork. Once I got better at it, Orville and I would go fishing, or whoever was staying at the Foreman's place. We would go and catch some fish and bring them up from the river for breakfast. Orville would fry up bacon and make his homemade pancakes and fry up the fish, and we would have fish and pancakes and bacon for breakfast. It just didn't get better than that.

Debo: No, it sounds great.

Richard: And Helen would bake on the wood stove about once a week, so there was this smell of fresh baked bread, and she made cinnamon rolls that were die for. I have that recipe. Her daughter Peggy sent it to me. She had gotten the recipe from the cook at the research station on Flathead Lake at Yellow Bay. It makes 80 cinnamon rolls, so it makes a lot. [Laughs]

Debo: Wow, 80. You would have to invite everybody in the North Fork over.

Richard: Yeah.

Debo: You mentioned the Red Bench fire. Tell me about the Red Bench fire.

Richard: Well, the Red Bench Fire was probably one of the biggest fires at that time, that most people could remember. It started September 6, 1988, and I was working for the Forest Service. But I'm going to back up a little bit on my career, I suppose. I worked in 1965 for the old Coram Ranger District, which has been since been incorporated into the Hungry Horse Ranger District, as a fire guard. Then in the summer of 1966, I applied to be a smoke jumper. As luck would have it, I didn't get that job, because I was nowhere near prepared for that. But they offered me a job on the hotshot crew at Big Creek. That was the first year that the hotshot crew was at Big Creek, and I worked for the Forest Service then through that season. Bruce Pyles was AKA Bloody. That was an inside joke of his.

But the next year I did go to work as a smoke jumper. Then I spent two years in South America in the Peace Corps doing fire work, and then I came back and was picked up again by the Forest

Service and worked full-time for the Forest Service for about 17 years. Then when I quit we moved to the Flathead, and that got me back into the North Fork. One of the guys that I had been on a national overhead team with was the district ranger at Glacier View, Tom Hope. He hired me to work on environmental documents and to be the aerial observer when they would fly air patrol during the fire season. So, it was that summer of 1988 that I happened to be an aerial observer. We took off early in the morning. I think Mike Strand, of Strand Aviation, had the contract to fly the air patrol. So, Mr. Strand and I took off and were going to fly over the Bob Marshall to check on a fire that was out, or in mop up stage, because there was a red flag warning for extremely high winds. As we started up over the Swan Range, I noticed that Mike cinched down his shoulder straps and his waist strap in the airplane. We started to bounce around, and I quickly followed suit. No matter how strapped down we were, I just remember we were bouncing around so much that my head kept hitting the headliner of the airplane. As we started up over the Swan Range, he said, "This is not going to be fun today," and it really wasn't fun at all. We bounced around and checked out the fire, and everything looked good.

We came back and landed at the city airport. That's when the Forest Supervisor's office was across from the city airport in Kalispell. I walked over to Dispatch to give them the rundown and talk about what we'd seen. Just as I walked in, I heard a report of a smoke on the Red Bench timber sale, or in that vicinity. I knew where that was, so I turned to the dispatcher and said, "We're on our way. I'll check in when we're airborne." Mike Strand and I came up over that afternoon. By the time we cleared city airport and were over Columbia Falls we could already see some smoke coming up in the vicinity of Red Bench. It was maybe only a quarter of an acre in size when we started to circle it, but it was just explosive. I've never seen fire behavior like that, and that's what I did for the Forest Service—on the overhead team I was a fire behavior analyst. I had never seen such extreme fire behavior, and this thing quickly started to take on a life of its own. We just circled and circled and circled, and this fire went from a quarter of an acre, to a half of an acre, to an acre, and just got bigger and bigger, and it just started to pulse. It started to undulate, like a jellyfish, only it was a red jellyfish. Then all of a sudden it just lifted itself out of the woods, out of the trees like a big, huge orange basketball. It just came out up in this column of smoke. The wind caught it, and the basketball of fire just about a quarter of a mile downwind just dropped. When it dropped, it exploded, and then there was five acres. This thing started to pulse, and it pulsed and it pulsed and it glowed like a huge cauliflower, and it just got bigger and bigger. It just lifted up this basketball one more time, and it exploded in fire. And it just continued to bounce its way down Red Meadow.

By then it was starting to get dark, and we were not supposed to fly in the dark, so Mike Strand said, "We need to get back to the airport." We got back to the airport in the dark, but we didn't tell them. I logged us out while it was still daylight, but we landed in the dark. Then I got in the truck, came up to Glacier View, and I came up the North Fork Road and checked in with some of the folks, with Tom Hope. I was by myself, and I drove across the Red Meadow bridge and got up to Vic Tacheny's old place. The Barnes's, I think, have that place just north up the road from Red Meadow Creek. Vic was an old homesteader; he homesteaded here in 1919. I knew Vic Tacheny, as well. But I turned around in his driveway and stopped there for a minute. There had been a fire crew with an engine crew spraying water on the building, and they left. As I turned around, I said to myself, 'Well, I'm looking at this for the last time. It won't be here in the morning." I could see the fire coming down the Red Meadow drainage. As I turned around, everybody else who had been up road of the fire was stopped on the bridge. I was last in line of this parade, and I thought, "This is not where I want to be. I don't want to be last in line; I would

rather be first in line." Eventually, everybody moved on just as the fire got to the Red Meadow bridge, and we beat feet back down to Polebridge. The fire took part of the next day to get to Polebridge.

Somewhere along the way I grabbed a little bit of sleep, but when the fire got to Polebridge an overhead team had been ordered, but I was at Polebridge when the fire came over the top of Polebridge. What I had done was, it used to be that you could make a loop from Polebridge over to the pole bridge and then come north under Vance Hill back out to the North Fork Road. The fire hadn't quite gotten there yet and still hadn't come down on the back side of Vance Hill. I said to Tom Hope, the district ranger, "Tom, maybe we can slow it down if we can backfire it from that far road [Loop Road]." He and I had worked a lot of fire together, and he said, "Well let's give it a try." He asked, "Does that road go through?" and I said, "Yeah, I just drove it. I know we can get through." So, we loaded up some drip torches mixed with gasoline and diesel and started over by the pole bridge. We started up that road and got as close to the fire as we could. Sometimes we were just driving alongside the road. He would drive, and I would hang on the tailgate of the pick-up truck, standing on the bumper. He could idle along. and I was running a string of fire. We would get to somebody's cabin, and sometimes the cabins were already engulfed, because they had stacked their firewood against the walls of the cabin. We just couldn't do anything about it. But we saved several cabins by just running a string of fire from their drive, for example, around so it would back-end, because the fire was sucking into and taking our backfire. We topped out back at the North Fork Road just as the fire hit the bottom of Vance Hill.

We made it back to Polebridge, and I think it took a little bit of the snoose out of the fire. It slowed it down a little bit, but it certainly didn't stop it. Tom said, "Well, Richard, you're in charge. I've got to go to a meeting, and the overhead team is going to form up at the fire camp. They're going to put in at Moran Creek." And he said, "You're here." So, I said, "Okay, thanks." I remember the last of the residents—and I wish I knew who this person was—but somebody pulled out, and they had a mattress in the back of their truck. They looked at me and said, "Will we be back?" I said, "Yes, you'll be back. Don't worry. You're going to be back. I don't know what you're going to come back to, but you'll be back." By then there were just 12 of us left at Polebridge. There was a Forest Service crew with 3,000 gallons in a water cannon mounted on the top of a truck. John Frederick, and then somebody with John, had decided to stay. They were going to evacuate in place. I quickly showed John how to use a fire shelter. I said, "Here, take this. If the place burns down, go out in the meadow where the old hockey rink is. Open it up, climb in, and stay put." He said, "Okay."

The Forest Service crew was running around driving their truck from cabin to cabin, shooting water on the cabins in the town site. The county road crew had about 3,000 gallons in each one of their trucks. They had these pumper trucks, tankers. They had backed them against the gasoline pump between the Northern Lights Saloon and the Merc, and we had run some hose out. These guys had never been on a forest fire before, and here's this wall of smoke and ash and fire coming right toward us. They said, "Now, you'll tell us when it's time to go, won't you?" I said, "Yep, count on me. I'll tell you when to go. When we're leaving, when we're pulling out, we're just going to go."

So, meanwhile they were spraying water on the Northern Lights, and as they were spraying water on the saloon embers were falling on their shirts. They didn't have fire shirts, and the one

guy was patting out the fires that would start on the other guy's back as their shirts would catch on fire, not flaming but just smoldering. So, it was kind of harum-scarum there, and then all of a sudden they didn't have any water. I was busy going back and forth as many places as I could get to and kept circling around, and the pumps had stopped. What's going on? Here were road crew guys from the county trying to start the gas pump at the Merc, because the pumps had run out of gas. I said, "I've already turned off the propane, and it's a propane generator. We can't make this gas pump work. Do you have any gas in your trucks?" They said, "Oh yeah, we've got five gallons in the truck." So, I ran over to the road crew truck and picked up a five-gallon Jerry can. These two trucks were parked parallel, side-by-side, with maybe two or three feet between them. Here I was, along with a couple of guys from the road crew. We were pouring gasoline into these trucks as embers were rolling around in this vortex between the two trucks. I was thinking, "This is not the smartest thing I've ever done." But, obviously, we didn't explode.

We got the lids back on, and I carried the gas back over. We got the pumps started, and we started spraying the Northern Lights. Then, all of a sudden, I could see that the meadow in front of the Northern Lights was about to catch on fire, so I jumped in the road crew pick-up truck and drove it into the meadow in front of the Merc. I just sat there, and as soon as that meadow exploded in fire and started to burn down, then the one in front of the Merc started to burn, so I moved the truck over to the burned-out meadow. One of the guys on the road crew said, "Now Richard, when is it we're supposed to go?" I said, "That was a half an hour ago. We're not going anyplace. We're here for the duration." They said, "Oh." So, we just stayed with it, and finally that road cleared and you could get back in. About that time the new fire boss from the overhead team came in. Just as he pulled in, there wasn't anything we could do about the old hay barn behind the Merc. It was just too porous, and there was too much hay in there, so it just burned to the ground. But it was a glowing skeleton. It had a life of its own, because it was on fire from the inside, not the outside.

There was another building. I remember it was the phony preacher [Bo Tanner] that had the cabin [Ben Bowerman cabin]. He burned it down anyway, afterwards. I don't know if you know the story about the phony preacher, but somebody else can tell that story. They had a tent revival going on in the big meadow just below Polebridge. He was a snake oil salesman, and he took people for a ride. But anyway, I remember Tom Hope and I could see the fire approaching that one cabin. I had a backpack pump on, and we had a drip torch so that we could fire off around the cabin. What we did was we would hide from the fire behind the cabin, then we would run out and spray a little bit of water, and we'd light a little bit of fire, and we'd protect it all the way around this cabin, and the fire went past us. I can remember flames beating against the logs and the logs withstanding that kind of heat. We saved that cabin, and then that guy burned it down maybe a year later. He was wacko. He was wanted in Texas. Anyway, he talked some people out of money for Bibles and hymnals and things. So, that's my Red Bench story.

Debo: Wow. You were right in the middle of it.

Richard: It was interesting.

Debo: So, when did you buy this place that you have on Moose Creek Road?

Richard: Actually, Suzanne bought this place. My wife Suzanne bought this place before we met. The night of our first date in Whitefish we went back to her house and sat and drank tea and

started telling each other North Fork stories. We soon discovered that we had a mutual love of the North Fork. Suzanne said, "Do you want to come see my cabin?" And I said, "I would love to see your cabin. Do you want to see the cabins I take care of?" And she said, "I would love to see the cabins you take care of." And we've been here ever since. We both just enjoy putzing around the place and doing things.

Debo: That's great. You have great stories, Richard.

Richard: Oh, not really. The tape doesn't show me grinning, I don't suppose.

Debo: We can probably hear it in your voice, though.

Richard: Over the years I've seen an awful lot of people come and go. Many people fall in love with the idea of the North Fork, but it's much rarer those who make it a place of the heart. But once it becomes a place of the heart, there is no turning back. I was reading an article in *Orion* magazine just a week or so ago, and there were a bunch of vignettes about where you live. They were also saying feel free to submit your article or your essay on where you live. I said to Suzanne, "I've come up with the first line. 'This is where I live, but it's not where I reside.' We reside in Whitefish, but we live on the North Fork," and that's the way it's become. It's just a wonderful place.

Debo: Yes, it's great. So, anything else?

Richard: How long have we been talking?

Debo: I don't know. I've been completely mesmerized by your stories.

Richard: [Laughs] Oh gosh.

Debo: It's good. I didn't get to ask you about any close encounters with animals.

Richard: You know, I've never had any really close encounters. What's amazing to me is from time to time when I lived at the Foremans but I was working for the Chrismans, and I would cross country between them, because it was almost faster to walk it than to drive it—not quite, but I would walk to work from Foremans cross-country down to near what's the old Kintla Ranch. The Chrismans bought from their place from old Bart Monahan, who was a homesteader. But, I never thought once about bear encounters, and that's pretty beary country. I would fish and walk around and not pay attention. That was long before the invention of bear spray, and I never had encounters with bears. In fact, I never really ran into grizzly bears until I met Suzanne. She said I was better than bear spray, because we weren't seeing bears, but this summer has been a big summer for bears for us.

Debo: You've been coming to the North Fork for a long, long time. What kind of changes have you seen over the years?

Richard: I've seen, of course, when the pine beetles first appeared, about 1971-1972. In the North Fork, the open stands of very mature, nice, big, tall, straight 10-inch diameter and better lodgepole pine, those stands are pretty much gone. You can still see a few around, but that's one

thing. The road was narrow and rough. They used to oil it, so you wanted to make sure that you weren't driving the road right after they oiled it, because you would never get the oil off the car. I was just thinking about the gas pump at the Merc. As I said, Ted Ross and his wife had the Merc. I suspect it's the same gas pump that's tucked in the corner at the Northern Lights Saloon, outside. It was one of those hand pumps that you just pushed and pulled the hand pump and it would fill this glass globe with 10 gallons of gasoline, and then gravity would drain it back out into your car. You walked into the Merc and said, "I've got about 9½ gallons or 9 gallons or 10 gallons," whatever it marked on this glass globe, and once a month you paid your tab at the Merc. They had little pigeonholes, and they kept a tab for everybody. And the reason they switched was that the gas tank leaked into the basement of the Merc, and it's lucky it didn't blow the place up and burn it down. But when that happened, they dug it up and that was the end of the non-electric gas pump.

Going to town was an adventure. We didn't do it often. Gosh, I remember, because at my house we never had a candy bar. I don't remember my parents ever buying me a candy bar. When we came out we would do one week's shopping to get us settled in, and then we would go do the big shop. Again, Helen would take out the three-ring binder, and we would go through the list and do all the things and inventories and decide what we needed and what pump part, and parts for this and parts for that, a generator, you name it and we had to have one thing after another. So, it was a major expedition. Sometimes it required us to stay overnight, and when we had to stay overnight we stayed at the Miller's house, Chuck and Margaret Miller. Her maiden name was Liebig. Her father was one of the first rangers in the Park, and Mount Liebig just to the south of Great Northern—it's Great Northern, Grant, and then Liebig—is named after him. Sometimes we would stay at the Liebig's house, if it was going to be an overnight, because we could get everything done.

But, we would get up early in the morning to make our major expedition to town. We would start pushing the carts—we would have three grocery carts full of things. I remember Orville saying, "What kind of candy bars do you like?" "Oh! I have never…" "Do you like Heath bars?" I never had a Heath bar. "Yeah, you might like a Heath bar then." And they would buy a whole box of them. I remember that the groceries came to $100, and I thought that was all the money in the world. I'd never seen $100 worth of groceries before in my life. Then we would bundle them all up and bring them back and hang that bacon in a sack. The milk stayed down in the root cellar until it spoiled. Then when it spoiled, I remember once Helen said, "Go down to the root cellar," and you had to climb down a ladder into the root cellar. She said, "Bring me up the milk." I brought the milk up, and it was chunky. I said, "It's spoiled." She said, "That's okay, we'll make cottage cheese," and then she turned it into cottage cheese. She didn't waste much.

Debo: So, there have been a lot of changes up here in the North Fork.

Richard: There have been a lot of changes. The Foremans had, early-on, put in a 32-volt generator, and that was enough to run some reading lights. Then they had a bank of glass storage batteries. Gosh, I don't know how many there were, but there were lots of them, so they could run all their readings lights off of those batteries. That 32-volt generator was enough to run the motor on the agitator washing machine. When laundry day came it was a big deal, because everything that could hold water was put on the wood stove to get hot water. Then we would hang laundry out to dry. For showers it was an open air shower. It was a 32-gallon old steel tank that was painted black. The theory was that by being painted black it would warm up enough

during the day that you could take a shower, and that if it was a cloudy day you didn't sweat enough so you didn't have to take a shower anyway. That was the theory, and so showers were few and far between. But if there was going to be a dance at the Hall, then you showered. Sometimes the best you could do was a sponge bath, but you cleaned up. I always wanted to look good, so I would put the irons on the stove and heat up the irons. To iron with a cast iron iron, you set up the ironing board. There was a square made out of a piece of blue jeans, padded kind of like a hot pad, and you would lift the iron off the stove and then you would hit it on that to make sure it was clean before you started to iron your clothes. You would sometimes spit on the bottom of the iron to see if it bubbled, and that way you knew it was hot enough. I always liked to have my snap shirts, western shirts—I had two of them I think, maybe only one, but I was going dancing. By golly, I wanted to have an ironed shirt, and I was indulged with that.

Speaking of that snap shirt reminds me that at the end of my first summer I came back and I was going to be a 7th grader, and school had already been in session for a week. My parents had already been to get my school supplies. Everybody already had friends. By then I had met Loyd Sondreson, and I wanted to be somewhere between a logger and a trapper. I wasn't sure which; I was conflicted. So, I showed up in 7th grade with my paper sack full of school supplies—what a dork. I had school supplies, and I was wearing my logger boots and my blue jeans and my flannel shirt. It was August or early September in Illinois. Nobody wore a flannel shirt in August or September in Illinois. I'm sure my classmates looked at me like who is this guy? I told them all I'd just been in the woods in Montana, and I'd been fishing and trapping gophers, and they looked at me like I was from Mars. My situation didn't get better that whole year. I was kind of a misfit, and that didn't help my academics at all. I went from being in the group of kids that were college-bound to the group of kids that were headed the other direction. But I still had my Montana roots by then. [Laughs] Oh, gosh.

Debo: You knew where your heart was.

Richard: I did, I did. Yes. So, that's my North Fork. I probably bored everybody to tears with this.

Debo: No, you did not bore anybody, and thank you so much for this interview. On behalf of the North Fork History Project, thank you.

Richard: You're welcome, and thanks to you. I know we didn't have much eye contact. I was just kind of looking out the window and letting my eyes glass over. I worry a little bit that I'm only 66 and that you would think I was old enough to remember a story or two. I figured it's the old folks that tell stories. I'm not there yet.

Debo: Nope, you're not there yet. You've got a long way to go.

[End of recording]