

## Tom Edwards Oral History Interview

October 29, 2012

Debo: My name is Debo Powers and today is October 29, 2012. I'm interviewing for the first time Tom Edwards. This interview is taking place at his home on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue West in Columbia Falls, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So Tom, tell us a little bit about your early background, where you were born and a little bit about your early life.

Tom: I was born in 1944 in Seattle, Washington, during World War II. My folks, who are listed in the history notes, were in the Coast Guard for World War II and stationed in Alaska and on the Washington-Oregon coast, so that's why I was born in Seattle.

Debo: And your parents came to the North Fork a long time ago. Can you tell us how they ended up in the North Fork, and then when was the first time you were there?

Tom: My mom, Thelma Edwards, was born in Kalispell, Montana. My dad was born in Bonner's Ferry, or actually a small town in Idaho. They met in [Glacier National] Park; I couldn't tell you what year. Mom was 16, and they were the same age, so dad had to be 16 as well. That's my family tie. The draw for the Edwards to the North Fork was Glacier Park. So we actually, according to Larry Wilson, were considered Park people.

Debo: Yes.

Tom: But we also are landowners outside the Park, as well, because of time and grade.

Debo: Do you remember what year your parents bought land in the North Fork?

Tom: No, but I stopped and figured out what year I arrived in the North Fork of the Flathead and Glacier National Park. I always thought it was in the late 1950s, but I decided—and I'm not using a calculator at the moment—that it was probably 1952, because I was 8 years old. My first full summer in the North Fork was at Logging Creek Ranger Station. My folks didn't purchase property in the North Fork, which makes us North Fork landowners, until much later, until the employment situation in the Park was coming to an end, due to the fact that the family was growing up and moving on. My folks were then in the North Fork. My dad's first full-time assignment at Logging Creek Ranger Station was prior to World War II, I think probably 1942. He had a one-year assignment at what is a part-time station today, but it was a full-time station back then. Poaching was the winter occupation for a ranger, and then in the summer it was tourists or dudes.

Debo: Poaching or catching poachers? [Laughs]

Tom: Good question. No, he didn't poach, but his patrol was, because those were hard times just coming out of the Depression, so people did sneak into the Park where there was an abundance of fish and game. Their ranger patrol work in the winter, which you would think would be non-existent, was on snowshoes, between snowshoe cabins, which most people don't realize are set between seven and eight miles apart—Dutch Creek, Logging Creek, Logging Lake. Snowshoe

Cabin is seven miles from the inside North Fork Road, and then the patrol cabin at the head of Logging Lake is seven miles to that cabin. Quartz Lake is a very similar situation, and Bowman Lake, as everybody knows, is eight miles from Polebridge. There were patrol cabins all up and down the west side of the Park, and I suppose the east side also, set at those intervals. I have a hard time imagining snowshoeing eight miles today, with good snowshoes. But they skied some too.

Debo: It must have been really great as a child to get to spend your summers at Logging Creek Ranger Station in the Park. Are they some of your earliest memories?

Tom: Oh yes, those were the best days. I suppose if we all look back today, I think the best years of my life or the best of the United States were back in the late 1940s or early 1950s, just because of the slower pace of life. That's where I learned all my outdoor skills. I was fortunate. I was old enough to be able to spend time with my dad working in the Park, because things were done at a slower pace. We didn't have ATVs. About the most modern innovations we had were a horse and a pack mule. We did a lot of work from foot, keeping the trails open and keeping the old hand-crank phone lines up. That was all done with an axe. I don't think we even had a chainsaw back in the days that we were seasonal rangers, but I'm sure that's changed now.

Debo: So, your first years were at Logging Creek?

Tom: All my years were, until I became an adult. Then I went to work at the Polebridge Merc for Ted Ross one summer. I think that was the summer of my 16<sup>th</sup> year. I got to spend two weeks at the store, and I hayed the Polebridge subdivision of today, which was a hayfield then. Then I got to spend time clerking in the store and cutting ice, because they sold block ice then, which came out of the river. The icehouse is still there today, and it was all kept refrigerated with sawdust. That would have been my exit from the Park, other than as a tourist now.

Debo: So, back in those old days what was North Fork like?

Tom: The North Fork was a great place. I had two brothers, so three kids seven miles from anybody. We treated the tourists really well, because we needed people to visit with. Radio reception, even AM radio reception in the Park back then, was pretty poor. To this day, some people have seen me out by my cabin by Moose City sitting out on my green bucket on the side of the road hailing down tourists to visit with them and make sure that they knew that if they had any questions that I could help them. Well, in the Park was the same thing. We would meet the people in the campground, because my dad's responsibility was to check the campground once a day and make sure the toilets were working and the garbage cans were taken care of and the tourists were enjoying all the comforts of the wilderness in the rain of June. So, we made a lot of lifelong friends. But then I traveled on my thumb from Polebridge to Logging Creek and back and forth. The draw in Polebridge at that time was girls. You know, I would tell my mom, "I'm going fishing." I would hide the fishing pole behind a tree, and then I would hitchhike to Polebridge and hang out with the young people that I could meet.

Debo: So, even back in those days Polebridge was a place where there were a lot of young people?

Tom: Yes. Polebridge was a bigger station. It had at least three families, along with smokechasers, and then the kids there were able to walk barefooted on a gravel road over to the store to purchase candy. Polebridge was the hub; it was the intersection of all the activity in the North Fork. The

Walter boys that lived at Bowman Lake for the summer, and the McFarland Dude Ranch—everything intersected in Polebridge. That’s where relationships began, and that’s how you got to know people. Then, as times went on, we would have once-a-week picnics, and people from outside of the Park—the Evans’ [Frank and Edna] would be a good example of that, and the Lawsons [Ruth and Hazen] from Square Peg Ranch—we all would get together at either the Community Hall, but more likely at the McFarland Dude Ranch. We were the entertainment, in a way, but we liked it because of the social interactivity with people from a different era. I could give the spiel about tamaracks being the only deciduous conifer in the Park, and people would go, “How does an 8-year-old boy know that kind of stuff?” My dad was a graduate forester, and my mom was a biologist, so I listened to a lot of that, and I was always eavesdropping on the adults and learned their lingo, I guess.

Those were good times when we were younger, but we spent most of our time in the creek in bathing suits and swimming. And we never were restricted. My folks couldn’t swim, but they never seemed to tie us up and keep us away from the water. So, we spent all summer putting dams in the creek and just doing things that kids do. But we had to haul water. We had a dynamite box that somebody put barrel stays under, and that’s how we hauled water to the horses and how we washed the barn. It’s hard to say; I mean, there’s still some buried treasure that we left. We left a time capsule at Logging Creek Ranger Station. I couldn’t tell you what it says today, but I know it’s buried and I probably could find it if I went digging for it, but somebody will find it someday.

Debo: That’s great.

Tom: Another childhood story that’s kind of fun and telling about the people is that the Evans kids were about our same age. We were really fortunate back then that we had a nice cluster of kids. We had April Evans and Buddy Evans, and then later we had Floyd Luke and Sharon Luke. We had the Lawson girls, which were Sharon and Kate, and I probably got that wrong. One of them’s now a Dill. I’m sure she’ll listen to this and say, “Oh boy, you’ve really got it messed up.” Then we had the two Walter boys who ended up with property in the North Fork, Pete and Dave, and we had all of the kids from McFarlands, and we had Gary Haverlandt, Paul Moratz and Tom Marx. And we had Richard Hildner, who had a whole different group up in his area of people, and then we had the Maas’s of course who were at Polebridge Ranger Station. That was Karen, Beverly, and Paula. So, square dances for young people—unlike they are today, where we end up with one square of young people—the parents had to ask if they could have the floor once in a while because there was too many kids. Oh, and the McNeil boys—Alan and Bruce, I forgot them.

Debo: What about the Funks?

Tom: The Funks, right, exactly. But see, with a couple of years, when you’re a teenager or almost a teenager, you could have different stratas within the kids. It’s almost like a grade thing. So, kids that I was friendly with, my brothers would be friendly with the next younger batch. But anyway, we always had a really good turnout at the square dances for young people, plus we would always have trail crews and fire crews, young men that were fun to dance with, who would come to dances because of the social activity, and that would relate to the crew from Polebridge. Polebridge now is a hub for young people. Flannery [Coats] always seems to bring a group up, and they have a great time dancing.

Karen Maas started square dancing when she was like five years old. I wish I could think of the person who was 80 back then, but we danced from 5 to 80—those were the age ranges. Oh, and I forgot about the Pittman kids, too; they were there, but at a little bit later time. So, the North Fork was a strong place, and it comes and it goes with the number of young adults. Now, at my age being into my 60s and semi-retired, I look back at young people and I think that they get as much value out of the North Fork, maybe more value than those of us that are older and can afford to be there. This past summer, which was 2012, we had an impromptu square dance hosted by the McFarlands, and we did have a square of sub-teens and teenagers that were really a lot of fun. What's McFarland's daughter, who's the dancer?

Debo: Was it Katie?

Tom: You know, I don't know. I remember seeing her when she was three years old dancing through Big Prairie. She could dance the man's part or the girl's part, and she was just enthralled to be there. That energy that the kids have is no different than it was years ago. One of the things that I remember about square dancing—and I got this from the Walter boys—we were young teenagers and we used to take two shirts to a square dance, because we would dance that hard, and there was a real social etiquette to dancing. Then when dinner was called late at night, which was 11:00 or midnight, some of the kids would haul their butts to the kitchen, and we always had Mary McFarland going, "Hey, save some for the old folks."

Eating after a dance was always a big thing, but it was a very big social event even back then. Another activity that was fun and got all generations involved, because we were dependent on our parents, was huckleberry picking. The women would get together, and somehow through the grapevine we would find out when the huckleberries were ready and when we could pick them. So, our moms—because the men were working—would gather all the kids together and take us out into the woods to pick huckleberries. Sometimes we picked huckleberries, and sometimes we had huckleberry fights, and we didn't score a lot of points when we did have the huckleberry fights.

One good story I have about huckleberry picking was my mom, Thelma Edwards, decided to go to West Glacier with a bunch of gals. They had a special spot up Fish Creek or McGinnis Creek where they were going to go huckleberry picking, and they left Bruce [Fladmark], who is on the North Fork in the summers now, and I think it was Gary Gingery and myself at home in Glacier and Apgar to our own devices. Well, we went on bicycles. I couldn't tell you where it was, but it wasn't four blocks from headquarters, and we picked huckleberries. This story may sound exaggerated and I was small, but the huckleberries we picked were the size of Flathead cherries. We picked probably a gallon between the three of us in maybe 20 minutes. We had our huckleberry fight, and we still had a gallon of huckleberries to take home. The women came home after driving up country and picking huckleberries, and they hadn't even filled the bottom of their buckets, and here we were all huckleberry-stained. They didn't even have to leave town. Right there in West Glacier they could have picked huckleberries, so that's the irony of the North Fork. When things happen, they happen and you never know why, when or what for. I mean it could be snowing today and sunshine tomorrow or smoky one day and clear the next. Okay, I'm ready for another question.

Debo: Tell me the story about the worms.

Tom: April and Buddy Evans were from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and they had the old Adair cabin [formerly the Chance Beebe homestead] right at the T-intersection across from the Polebridge

store. Their dad was a teacher at the junior college there, and their mom was a nurse. Back in the early days they outfitted in the Park, the Evans' did. When the kids came along to the North Fork the family always had to work, or that's the way the story is that they tell. Because they were outside the Park, they could sell fishing bait, so they had a big sign on their fence that said "Worms for Sale." Fishermen don't really like to fish with worms. They like to find out where the fish are to take the worms. So, the Evans kids always had a good story to go with their worms, and they did farm worms. They took coffee grounds and they watered in certain spots. I don't know the number of dollars that they sold, but the story goes that they made enough money in the summer to be able to buy their school clothes when they went back to Coeur d'Alene, and they thought it was terrible and horrible that they would have to work that hard and buy their own clothes, because the other kids didn't have to go through that.

Me, being the entrepreneur that I was, my grandma lived in Kalispell and I could get worms from her lawn, plus we could dig worms if we knew the right place in the rocky soil around Logging Creek. One day I got some worms in cups and dozed them out, and I put a little sign the same size you would find on a for sale sign on a car, and I hung it on the fence in Glacier National Park. My dad caught onto that and started screaming and hollering, "You can't do that! I'll lose my job. You have to have a concession to sell things in the Park." I don't remember how the story went exactly, but to make it good the west side district ranger came down the road and wanted to know why there was a for sale sign on the ranger station fence, because he hadn't read the small print. Was the ranger station for sale, or were the worms for sale? The sign came down the next day. I think we sold two-dozen worms, and we were never allowed to sell worms again because we weren't official in the eyes of the United States Government.

Debo: [Laughs] That's a good story. I love hearing all the stories about the kids your age, but I bet you knew some of the old-timers, some of the old homesteaders in the North Fork. Did you?

Tom: I did. I hayed Harry Holcomb's place, and I ate lunch with them. The Holcomb story that I like, the first day I went in for lunch and it was really neat, because he was old at the time and I was working with Stoney [John] Stonestreet, and we were kind of helping him put up his hay, so we got a two-hour lunch. We got to eat for an hour, and we got to nap for an hour. But Harry Holcomb, when you sat down at the table, iced tea was served and there was a great big farm-style meal. I reached for the sugar to put in my iced tea and he says, "Son, take it easy on that, I have to buy that," and he says, "The same goes for the salt. You can have all the potatoes you want, you can have all the meat you want, you can have all the fish you want, just go easy on the stuff we have to buy." I never forgot that, because he was a true pioneer in the North Fork and a homesteader, and he looked at things differently. They were used to living very frugally. I don't have any idea what they spent, but money to them was not a commodity that they could come by easily. So, they raised cows and beef and had a horse or two, and we did everything the hard way there. He was a neat old-timer that I remember.

Andy Fluetsch, whose property we purchased above Moose City, was a retired ranger. He had been a ranger at the old Kishenehn Ranger Station and at Polebridge. My dad had worked for him as a young man, a smokechaser back when he was 17. I met him and worked for him in his retirement setting over at Oleny. He bought a farm over there and raised cows, and my first haying experience at age 12 was on Good Creek out of Olney, Montana. We hayed with horses and pitchforks and one mower, loose hay, which was a lot of fun and quite a bit different. Old-timers

in the North Fork that I remember, I remember the Wurtz's, Frank and Ella. Really nice people, very generous people.

And in the North Fork you could never stop at somebody's house, even Maxine Maas—if you stopped there, you were automatically offered something to eat, a cup of coffee. Back then people would get their feelings hurt if you didn't at least accept something. You tried not to stop at peoples' houses exactly at dinner time or lunch time, because you knew you would be offered something, and if they weren't planning on you they could feed you, but you didn't score any points with them.

Then we moved into the McNeils, who are a lot of fun because they were from Chicago, and they were able to pick up the ways of the North Fork early on. They were very gracious and good hosts. To this day Cecily will still bring grapes to the Community Hall and different things, because she never would be caught without some sort of a contribution. Frank and Edna Evans had been around the North Fork since the early 40s and were really gracious people. Frank ended up being like a grandparent to my daughter Kirsten. One of the neat things when she was born, instead of sending a welcome to the world present or blanket or something, he sat down and pulled sort of a Don Sullivan wordsmith and wrote a two-page letter, Welcome to the World from Frank Evans. And this is what your dad and I have been doing when you arrived. She still has it in a book, which turned out to be a really neat thing.

One of people that I probably need to talk more about is Frank Evans. He ended up being a biology teacher, and I think he was head of the Ag Department at Coeur d'Alene Junior College, which is a pretty big school in North Idaho. Because he was a biologist, he was fun to go in the woods with, because he could answer any questions you had—what kind of trees, species, genus, mushrooms, fishing, white fish, salmon, snagging for salmon. He was always very friendly with all the homesteaders and the part-time residents in the North Fork, because he always wanted to be able to have permission to hunt on their place in the fall when they weren't there. He had a root cellar and he canned. In the winter he would go down to the Gulf of Mexico and he would can different seafood and bring it home. Canning was a way of life for him. I spent a lot of time at Frank's place when I first moved here as an adult, which would have been 1972. He could come to our place in town, and then I would spend my days off—which were always Tuesday, Wednesday or something—in the North Fork with Frank and help him put up firewood.

The one story I like to tell about him is because he lived with no refrigeration just as the pioneers lived. One fall he bought a box of apples, and he had a baked apple recipe. So there's two of us in this cabin, and he had a big pan that held at least 12 apples. He cored them and stuffed them and baked them, and we ate apples three times a day. But it was a fruit and it was a good thing, and he was a great cook, as Ray Hart can attest to... some of his recipes are in Cecily McNeil's North Fork cookbook. In fact, I'm happy to bring that up. We kind of talked about other North Forkers, but one of the reasons that the history project even got started was because of Cecily McNeil's 1972 cookbook. We got to reminiscing, because everybody has a name in that cookbook. We got to reminiscing about people that weren't there and those that were there, and that's what got us to realizing that we needed to record the history in the North Fork, because as we all mature and age we're starting to lose some of our people. So, I would like to give credit to the fact that Cecily's cookbook has done more than just be a cookbook and more than just mark a space in time. At the current time there is a cookbook that's in the works. It's kind of letting the cat out of the bag, but Gary Haverlandt is doing another North Fork cookbook almost 40 years later, which we hope will

be out in the next couple of years. But that's a really good way for us to mark history, because if everybody is like me, you run on your stomach and food is really important, and it was as important to the pioneers as hunting is important to people now.

The Sondresons—everybody today knows about Sondreson Hall and why we have a Community Hall and how good it is. I knew Ruth and Loyd, not as well as many people, but I met them a number of times and I danced with Ruth Sondreson. Ruth was on the heavy-set side and was a great square dancer. At age 12 she taught me to square dance, and she taught a lot of us young people to square dance. She was really good, and she could dance either the man's part or the woman's part. So what I tell about her is that at age 12, when Ruth Sondreson swung me and I came off the ground, that's when I learned what square dancing was all about, and maybe it made me a better square dancer, or at least it made a memory that I'll never forget. I'm sure their names have come up in some of the other interviews. The Sondresons were great people in the North Fork and very generous with their time.

Debo: They had a lot to do with the Community Hall, didn't they?

Tom: They milled the wood. They milled the logs for the Community Hall. And not only that, because they were there year-round and were actively working, they were people you saw on the road all the time. They were a very visible part of the community. I don't know the years that they were there, but they were responsible for the border station and some of those things, only because they did some logging in Canada. Loyd was a pretty smart individual in his own right. He had an airplane, and he was a member of Flying Farmers. They wintered sometimes in Arizona, and he would fly parts in for his logging operation. He was the Paul Bunyon of the North Fork, back in the 1950s, I guess you would say.

Debo: Was your family active in the North Fork Improvement Association?

Tom: The answer is only in the summers, and the level of activity probably was more on the social end, and it was to make sure that their boys didn't get left in the backwoods in the summer. Because we did have to go back to the big cities for our education and schooling, and my folks always participated in whatever they did. They were members as long as I've known members of the North Fork Improvement Association, now known as the North Fork Landowners Association. Everybody knew them, at least people that came in contact with them, so I think they made their mark in that respect.

Debo: So, you were here in the summers, then you went back to school in the city.

Tom: I went back to California. I had swimming pools, was provided paper and pencils and all of the good things that California has to offer, so I had the best of both worlds.

Debo: So, how is life different in the North Fork than back in California?

Tom: I don't know that it was that different. The social aspect was sparser in the North Fork than probably in the cities. I just attended my 50-year high school class reunion. I was from a graduating class of 302 people. We all lived in the same homes and went to three high schools. Because we were part of the baby boom generation, they were building classrooms as fast as they could, in order for us to have a place to go to school. California in 50 years has really grown and changed.

Even the little town that I came from, which was a square area of two miles by three miles, the high school only lasted for 20 years, and then it ran out of students because the property prices in that neighborhood had gone up. The high school was sold 20 years after it was originally built for \$638 million, and the land was turned back into residential lots on a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay. So, I really did have the best of both worlds.

The difference was that the North Fork was dirt roads, lots of mosquitoes, and you learned to be nicer to people because there was fewer of them. So, you were always glad to see people, because you might not see many people in June and September, as opposed to the two busy months which would be July and August. But we were able to fish, and I don't know, the North Fork to me was the greatest place to grow up. We learned to run a cross-cut saw and axes. We learned to grease our boots. It seems like all we did in June was keep our boots greased, because it rained every day and it snowed in July a time or two. I guess as you get older you forget what was great about it when you were young. But the Polebridge Store, Ted Ross was our—I don't like to use the word icon, but that's what he was—because when we got to go to the store it was a big deal. You knew the storeowner, and you didn't steal candy even though it was penny candy, because you knew the people. You were responsible for yourself, and you were responsible for your brothers, because you had a reputation to live up to, and you didn't need to get into trouble.

Debo: What was the North Fork road like back in those days compared to today?

Tom: Well, compared to the year 2012 the North Fork road was beautiful, and it's still in pretty good shape. Back then we used the Inside Road almost exclusively, because we worked in the Park. We would go to town for lieu days off, and if I'm not mistaken they were Wednesday and Thursday, and we would come back on Friday mornings at 5:00 in the morning, so we would be in our district on the way home. My dad would be on the job, and actually he was patrolling in his own car. The Inside Road hasn't changed hardly at all—small and winding, chuckholey, where a top speed of 20 miles an hour is probably too fast. But I did have occasion to ride to town with Ted Ross. We took his old beat-up pick-up to get supplies for the store. The story I remember the most was we couldn't see where we were going because of the cloud of dust that was in front of the truck. Back then the windows were down, and you ate the dust, but you enjoyed it because you knew you were going to town. Well, I happened to look up from the front seat of the pick-up and I could see blue sky and a load of logs about three feet in front of the pick-up, but the dust was so thick we didn't realize we were directly behind a logging truck.

Back then when logging was big in the North Fork, the loggers' association kept the road bladed, and they kept the road oiled. In front of the Evans place it was always oiled. As kids we would be sitting in their front yard by the swimming pool, which has now been covered up to prevent a lawsuit. And the truckers would honk, because all the kids were waving at them and the trucks would honk as they went by. The North Fork road, in the old days you didn't drive fast unless you were from McFarland Dude Ranch and showing off for the girls, because flat tires were a really, really big issue. I mean, if you didn't have two spares you didn't get to town, or if you had two spares you would get to town and you'd still have two flats when you got home. The road has been an evolutionary thing. Early times, before my time, it was actually carved out by the people that used it, as opposed to by the county who now expect to do it, because it was our road and we needed to get by. And you always waved at people. You always stopped and helped them, and even to this day I still stop and talk to people if they are pulled over taking a picture and just ask them if they are having trouble or where they are from or do they know where they're going. I've

been known to tell them about the saloon at Polebridge, so that they can go up and have a good meal. The North Fork can be an unfriendly place if you drive down the road and all you see is No Trespassing signs, keep out. I don't think the Forest Service has enough river use campgrounds, because of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and it behooves all of us that are in the North Fork to make a real effort to welcome visitor to the Park. The neat thing is that you can meet people from all over the world. I'm sure you've met them hiking, and in that setting you really find out who they are and why they're there.

Debo: When you were first up here in the North Fork, how did people communicate with each other? Because there weren't phones.

Tom: There were phones, but phones weren't the issue, and radios weren't the issue. If you wanted to communicate with people in the North Fork you went and stood on Main Street in Kalispell in front of a store called Butry's, which was not a grocery store or JC Penney's or Jack's Bar. You stood on the sidewalk and leaned up against the building, and you would see somebody from the east side of the Park or from West Glacier or from the North Fork, and you would say, "Would you pass a message to so and so?" And just as today, they would say, "Oh, so and so is in town." Times were slower. Mail delivery was twice a week, as it is now, and notes and messages were passed, possibly to the detriment of the postal department. It was just a more hands-on environment, and people were passing notes and messages back and forth, and I suppose that caused problems. But you looked forward to seeing people in town, because town would be a meeting place. Or when people were headed to town, many times they would stop by our place and say, "We're going to town. It's our day off, it's Friday. Is there anything you need from town?" Then they would bring you back whatever it was you had forgotten, and everybody kept a list by their chair or their table, because sometimes you didn't go to town but every two weeks. Many people in the North Fork today only go to town once a month, those that live on the far end of the road. I think going to town every day to go to the grocery store is silliness. If you can plan your trips to town, with gas prices being what they are today, many people instead of going once a week are back to twice a month and just utilizing their time much better. But then the next week you've got five events in town, so maybe you lose some of that. How often do you go to town?

Debo: This year I went once every three weeks, and one time I went four weeks. Yes, I love that.

Tom: So, you're building a way to survive longer intervals?

Debo: Yes. I'm trying not to go as much as possible.

Tom: Because gas is ridiculous. When I was in California gas was \$5.79 a gallon. I spent \$100 in my gas tank one time.

Debo: So, you were in the middle of the 1988 Red Bench fire.

Tom: Oh yes. I was working; I lived in Whitefish at the time. My brother went to the store and called me, Gary did, and said there is a fire in the North Fork. He said, "I'm out of gas to run the water for the well," and could I come up and help him, because he didn't know what was going to happen, but there was a fire. We didn't have a good enough well, and we did not have enough water pressure to get to the top of the cabin or the top of the barns. I forget who it was, the Forest Service had hired somebody out of Whitefish—his name escapes me, a nice guy. He came in and

ran a fire line around our homestead cabin, but when the fire jumped off of Benchmark Road, up there by Red Meadow Creek, it jumped in two jumps at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. The fire didn't look like it was ever going to be a threat to us. I was there, and I had been watering down the property and the house all morning with what water I had, and the fire jumped. There were pieces of wood the size of a coffee cup dropping out of the sky into the meadow in the field where we were, and then two jumps which probably were two miles and one mile. It was on top of the homestead, and the place turned black and the fire just rolled through. Fortunately, we had enough cleared ground that it was never a threat to my brother's life or my life.

Then Ron Olson came up with a dump truck and 1,000 gallons of water to my brother Gary's place. As the fire went over he watered the place down and kept all the embers in place. Then he turned around and got out of there, and that's what saved my brother's place on the hill. I was over at the folks' log cabin. It was the Chester Wall place. It was homesteaded and built in 1910, and the fire consumed that old cabin because it had a hand-hewn double Tamarack shingle roof. It took about 12 minutes for that to burn up. So, I got in my truck and went to my brother's, because I knew that he still had water and he had a bigger cleared area. Fortunately, he had cleared about five acres to the north and west of his place, so the fire didn't roll through as hot, and it was cool enough that we were able to keep the fire out of there. But we wouldn't have saved his place had it not been for Ron Olson and his wife bringing us that 1,000 gallons of water. I tell everybody to this day it was more fun than going to Disneyland. I'm glad I was there, but I would never want to do it again.

Debo: I remember there was one point when they thought the Edwards boys were lost in the fire.

Tom: That was on the front page of papers around the country, fire reporting, and for many years I was really pissed off at the Forest Service, because they had driven in and looked the place over and said, "We've got a crew coming down the road, and we're going to come in here and put down some water and give you a little more protection around the house." And they drove on by; they didn't stop. But remembering what they were seeing in their rearview mirrors as they were headed south, they were right not to stop, because the fire was right on their hinnies. It took a while to get over that, because you always want to blame somebody else for what transpired, but no, they did a good job and they were on top of it.

This might be a good point to interject. I think instead of wasting a lot of money fighting fires, if the Forest Service would spend a percentage, 25 percent of their firefighting money, on fuel reduction in the forest, or if the people that are really green, and I know a lot of really green people, would let them manage multiple use the forest, the way it should be, there's no reason that our forest should burn and burn and burn, year after year or every ten years or whatever. We've got a really neat resource there, and we're not managing it the way that it needs to be managed. We can take some of our firefighting dollars and use it to lighten the fuels in the forest, and I think we would be a lot happier and have a better world.

Debo: Were there any other big disasters that you saw in the North Fork? Floods and ice?

Tom: I missed the 1964 flood. I saw the aftermath of it. Every year is a disaster of a different proportion. It can be because your woodshed is empty. It can be because the mosquitos are too thick. It can be because you can't fish in the river. It can be because it snowed in July. You didn't get your hay in. But that comes with getting out of your house and living on the land. As we get

older it gets harder to do, but I think that's what makes the North Fork special to a lot of people. But I've also said, and I believe this in tandem—not to take anything away from it—what makes the North Fork special are the people in the North Fork. Without the people, it's just another piece of ground.

Debo: I bet over the years you've had some close encounters with animals.

Tom: Um, surprisingly not. I was raised to not be afraid of bears, and my dad never carried a gun in Glacier National Park. Not that he didn't have one available, should he really need it. I don't know that he ever really needed it. We chased bears as kids—black bears, grizzly bears. Of course, there was three boys making more noise than a pack of dogs, throwing rocks, and they can run faster than we could, so we could never catch them. One time we had a problem with porcupines at Kishenehn. We were looking for porcupine quills. But as far as having disasters, a disaster is what you make, if you're not prepared. The one story that I tell, and my mom could account this more, because I mentioned earlier that my folks couldn't swim. Late one summer we were fortunate enough to stay into early September, and it was a pretty dry year, and we spent all of our summers in the creek and at the river fishing. For some reason all of the people had left the North Fork, and we were left to our own devices. There was an island across from Coal Creek, and Logging Creek is right across from it. We were busily playing in the river, and we walked out to the island, then oh, we're halfway through the river. It was really a big thing. We were going to walk across the river and get to the other side. It's kind of like jumping across the Canadian border and being in the U.S. So the three of us went across the river. My little brother was maybe five, and he couldn't swim. And even though the river was one-tenth of what it is in the spring, the middle of the river is still kind of deep, especially when you're only five years old. He started to go down the river once, but we caught him and we drug him across. I guess looking back at it, we all should have drowned that summer in the river, because we had no adult supervision and we were where we shouldn't have been, and we were doing stuff we shouldn't have been doing, but it all worked out for the best. When we told the story my mom's hair turned grayer than it had been before. I've always looked back at that knowing that that was a really dumb thing, because I was the oldest brother and I would have been held responsible, and I would have held myself responsible if he hadn't come back with us.

Debo: Yes. Over time, over all these years, what have you seen as the biggest changes in the North Fork?

Tom: My personal perception has changed. I remember when the fire went through I said, "That's it. I'm done with the North Fork. It's ugly, it's smelly, and I won't be back." But I couldn't stay away, so I went back and realized that was the best thing that ever happened to the North Fork. The views opened up. It wasn't what I thought it was, but it was better. And now, 1988 to now—how many years are we passed the fire, almost 30 years?

Debo: Yes.

Tom: Now it's climaxing again to where the views are gone, because the trees are coming up, and I guess everybody's perception and everybody's need in the North Fork is different, whether it's social or to get away to nature and be able to go fishing in Bowman Lake or Kintla Lake, or Quartz Lake or the river. The social things seemed to have changed, as well. For a long time I hated the North Fork Saloon, because I thought it was taking the city and bringing it into the North Fork.

But I've got to admit Friday night pizza is one of the best things that ever happened in the North Fork, because people get together from all walks of life, and if you're there only for a short vacation you can see more people on a Friday night pizza night at the saloon than you can if you're going down everybody's driveway trying to say hi, because you just can't do it. So, it's changing and it's staying the same, and we have a lot of people that are trying to make sure that it stays the same, and I think that's good. But because of my senior age, I would caution the hikers of the world to remember the old folks still need to get out in the woods, too. My daughter always says, "Well Dad, you can always drive to Bowman Lake." The Park Service—I hope they hear this and don't decide to make that a wilderness and take that road out of there. But it's hard for an area like the North Fork, which is going to have wilderness in it in Glacier Park and the new wilderness that's proposed for the North Fork, but they have to remember that snowmobiling in the winter time is really fun for people that have snowmobiles. People that have horses can ride the trails. Multiple use is the key. We can't slant it, but the overriding issue is that the North Fork needs to stay as much as it can the same, so that we can look back in time and see where we've come from and what we've lost, I think. It's really hard to balance all of that, but I still think multiple use is the key, with controls.

Debo: Do you have anything else, any other stories that you would like to tell?

Tom: I probably have 100 of them, but I forgot them, so I'm going to reserve a second interview time, in a different setting and maybe do a little better job of taking notes so that I can remember to hit some of those.

Debo: That sounds great.

Tom: I hope that provides a flavor for what it was in 1952 to 2012 which is 60 years, and we're headed in the right direction, as long as we just don't give up.

Debo: That's right. Well, on behalf of the North Fork History Project I would like to thank you for this interview.

Tom: You're welcome. Thanks for doing this.

[End of recording]