

Richard Hildner\_Nov\_2012

This interview was conducted by Debo Powers.

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. And 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 really.

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 3-ring notebook and we drove out from the 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. And I remember going to the B&B Grocery in Kalispell, picking up those groceries and 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. And we had no refrigeration in those days at the Foreman's Ranch which is called the Sawtooth Ranch, and Orville would in the morning send me down into the root cellar of the original homestead cabin, Emil Peterson's homestead cabin and I would pull down a cloth flour sack in which this slab of bacon would hang. [Laughs] And I would bring it up and Orville would figure out how many had to be fed and he would slice off that many slices of side bacon. And then he always saved a piece of the rind that had some fat on it to grease the griddle for his pancakes. And 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 I 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." And she grabbed that bacon and she slathered it with vinegar and scrubbed it with a brush and 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 and you could see into the next century or back to the last one from Illinois, that part of Illinois, central Illinois. And 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 lost the prime and one thing after another.

And this went on for days, and every day I would bug Orville and I would 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, I said, "So when are we going trout fishing? When are we going trout fishing?" [Laughing] And 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 saying, "When are we going fishing?" And then about the third or the fourth day we were here we had to down to... their cabin is up on the bench, the homestead cabin was on the bench and we had to go down quarter or half mile to the river, and it's a steep climb down into there and the river doesn't cross there anymore, but Orville said... the river came up again the log jam and he said, "Throw a fly right out there," and I threw a fly out there. I had never fly-fished before and I threw the fly out there. A fish came roaring out of there and went right over the top of my fly and I screamed and hooted and hollered and missed it. And that happened in succession time after time, and Orville was beside himself with laughter. I think I 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 we would take... well Orville called them GI cans but they were garbage cans, and we would load two garbage cans in the back of the jeep. And we would drive down to the Trail Creek Bridge and we would stop at the bridge and throw a bucket over the edge of the bridge into the creek and then we would haul the bucket up and pour buckets of water into these big garbage cans and then haul the water and 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. Oh it was wild wild country. And the road – 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. 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. [Chuckles]

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

Richard: Yeah I did actually. I knew Harry and Lena Holcolm. Many people called them Ma and Pa Holcolm. They were one of my first and earliest memories of the homesteaders. The Wurtz were still on their property when I arrived. Ollie and Madge Terrion, Ollie Terrion they 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. And Ralph and Esther Day were still here. Early on Ralph had brought the mail. He brought the mail over from Belton from West Glacier and he brought it through the old Inside Road to Polebridge and then he drove it north from Polebridge and delivered the mail.

And then, well let's see, Ted Ross had the store and Fred Boss drove the mail when I was here. The mail was as it is even today mail day is an exciting day, and 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 and 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. And then Fred would come by and we would have a little conversation and often times what we would do would leave a shopping list for him, some things that we really needed like fresh milk and then he would go shopping. You would give him a brief shopping list and he would shop for everybody up and down the North Fork. And you wanted to be there when he delivered the next time because if you didn't you didn't want the fresh food sitting there for the bears. But that was what I remember.

Debo: [Laughs]

Richard: It was always that conversation. And 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. Well you got a big grin on your face when you talked about Ollie and Madge. Do you know stories about them?

Richard: Well, yeah, 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, and as she recounted the story that she had gone to town because she had to get some chickens, live chickens, and she also needed to get some parts. And so the Pontiac, the place she said she always got parts was the junkyard, that's 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 and Madge was only about 4'10" tall, maybe 4'11", was 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. And what had happened on this occasion was that she approaching her place and she had to come around, and it was a hairpin turn coming into Cold's Creek, came down the hill and made a right-hand turn around in that short bend. She said she lost her steering and went down into Cold's Creek, and when she went right down into Cold's Creek of course the chickens all escaped and she just left it right there in the creek, the Pontiac. And she walked back and told Ollie what had happened and they decided nothing could happen until morning, and so 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 no diminutive in her stature if you understand what I mean.

Debo: Yeah.

Richard: Because she had this penetrating look. She had...for a 12-year-old boy, 13 those early years she was somebody I sometimes I felt a little frightened of her because I never met anybody quite like her. She wore men's clothing. She wore these shirts and boots and flannel shirts. And Ollie, Ollie was probably 5'8" tall, wiry. I mean wiry would describe Ollie. And I remember that he had... 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 and his name was Cola and it was a black German Sheppard and it was crossed with mean. And I had to every once in a while ride with Ollie because part of one summer we picked rock up Trail Creek up above [Two Shuck] for the Foreman's fireplace because they were building a new larger cabin. And when I would get in Ollie's pick-up truck, his jeep pick-up that dog rode in the back but it didn't like anybody else riding in the truck and every single time Ollie would yell, "You son of a bitch!" And he would yell at the dog and then he would pick up a stick, and before he could pick up that stick that 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 did not like Cola. I did not like that dog at all.

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 and we were throwing shovel... We had two shovels

and one had a very small blade and then there was a standard sized shovel and I picked up a big shovel, and he said, "No, you use this little one," and I said, "I'm not using any little shovel," and he and I had a faceoff right there. I ended up using the little shovel. [Laughs] But that was Ollie and he didn't have a tooth in his head, and that's why I think he loved coming to Helen Foreman's kitchen.

Before they built the big cabin she had a big monarch, still has it but it's in the newer cabin now that we built and I helped build in 1962, but she always had a pot of soup on the back of that stove and anything that was left over got thrown in that pot of stew or soup or whatever it was called. And if somebody showed up she would just start throwing water in it until it was enough to go around. But Ollie I think liked that because he didn't have to chew anything. When he would stop for dinner he was pretty clever about showing up. This is after Madge had died. He was pretty clever about showing up at mealtimes 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." That's what he would do.

And he rolled his own cigarettes. I thought that was pretty fascinating. I never met anybody that rolled their own cigarettes and 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. [Laughs] 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?" And I just thought trapping was the end-all and I had read everything I could about trapped. 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 be that there would be a trap in such bad condition for a guy who was noted up here as a trapper. And as we were unloading those traps the Foreman's had given Ollie permission and encouraged him to live at their homestead cabin on Mud Lake and we were unloading those traps into the barn and 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 and he liked them. They were all scented up just the way he wanted him. [Laughs] He didn't want any scent of oil on them. Oh boy that was almost a big screw-up. So.

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

Richard: Well, I knew as I said Harry and Lena Holcolm because the Foreman's always checked in with the Holcolms. Orville was always willing to help people with their legal work. 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 Mr. Vot, L. O. Vot of Mount Vot in Glacier National Park. Mount Vot is named after him. So we would stop in always and frequently at the Holcolms and have a cup of coffee and I remember Harry would always say after Lena poured a cup of coffee and there was sugar on the table he would say, if somebody reached for the sugar he would say, "Go easy on that, we have to buy that," because they grew and raised... They were pretty self-sufficient on their homestead and 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 was one of those...had that caricature of you know when you have a dried apple you carve a person's face out in an apple and it dries up? Well that's the way it was and both of them, and Harry had these really thick glasses. He couldn't see very well at all, but he wore these 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 just remember once that Orville shows up and he said, "Lena I brought you a present," and she just giggled and she said, "Oh yeah, what did you bring me?" I...I brought you some toilet water. This is eau de cologne thing sort of thing, but toilet water, and it was in a vessel that was the shape of a toilet. [Laughs] And he said, "Lena I wanted you to have this," [laughs] and Lena just started to giggle. She just giggled and giggled and giggled and she couldn't get over that Orville had brought her some toilet water in a toilet boil.

Debo: [Laughs] There were really some characters up here.

Richard: Oh there were. I remember going out, we needed some kerosene; the Foreman's needed some kerosene so we stopped at the Holcolms and said can I get a gallon of kerosene from you? And Harry said, "Yeah, there's some out..." It's one of those wooden barn shed structures out the back, so we went out there and that's how I learned how to siphon without having to suck the gas or oil or kerosene out. He just reached over and he grabbed the section of hose and he stuck the hose down in this 55-gallon drum and then all way down in there. Just before he pulled the hose out he put his thumb over it and he 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. And I thought wow this is really cool, and I've used one of those kinds of credit cards since, and it really works.

Debo: [Laughs] Yeah. That's great.

Richard: The Wurtz', the Wurtz' were...they would sew in the winter time. A lot of people would drop off their hides, deer and elk and they would, if you left them a green hide they would give you a pair of gloves that they had made the winter before in exchange. And Orville had a jacket that he had killed and elk and he took the hide to the Wurtz and they made him an elk hide jacket out of that. They had to add a little 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: So how did the Foreman's end up in the North Fork? How did they end up with a homestead piece?

Richard: Yeah. Helen had... Well Mr. Vot came to Glacier Park before Glacier Park was a park to hike and to hunt. He believed he was an attorney and he believed that you should be able to get your work down in ten months of the year and have two months to recreate, to vacation. And he came out as a guest of the railroad, and in those days Mr. Kelly had a homestead at the head of Lake McDonald and it's since become or became known as Kelly's Camp. A buckboard would meet them at the Belton Train Station and take them up to Spray Creek on the lake or on up to Kelly's.

That's how Mr. Vot came to this country and then he brought his niece, Helen Foreman, Helen Cleary before she married Orville. And so as a young woman Helen kind of had walked through this country with her uncle. And 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 supper at Upper Quartz. Then after the war Orville was in the Marine Corp in the Pacific and after the war they came back to the park and said it's time to start looking around because the park is going to get crowded. And they looked for property and discovered that Ed Peterson had his brother's, his deceased brother's homestead for sale and they couldn't afford it, all of it, so Helen and her brother Ed split that homestead, and they bought the Emil Peterson homestead.

And then when Ed Peterson left, had to sell up and went to as I understand it went 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 50s, maybe as late as 54. I don't know exactly when that transaction took place, so that's how the Foreman's came into that piece of property. And it's been in their family ever since and I'm just really lucky that the family, Peggy and Mike – there were three children, the Foreman's had three children, Connie, Peggy and Mike, Peggy was the oldest, they've kept me in the loop. Connie died many years ago, but Peggy and I still carry on quite a conversation and they've kept me in the loop and 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, yes. And you told me that they bought the property for some outrageous amount of money.

Richard: Yeah. Two years ago I ran into... was contacted by Ed Peterson's grand nephew and Mellum is his name. What's his first name?

Debo: Carl.

Richard: Carl, Carl Mellum, just out of the blue he had made an inquiry on the North Fork and somebody said, "Well talk to Richard Hildner because he knows all about the Foreman property." And Carl came out and brought some old pictures of Ed Peterson's homestead and we got to talking and he said, "Well you might be interested in this letter." And here was a letter that Ed Peterson had written to his family back in Michigan. Ed was one of three brothers – Ed, Axle, and Emil, and all three of them homesteaded up here and all three of them 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." And as far as I know that's what he got was \$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 would have could have should have and you say it was worth...sold for such and such, I could have bought it for such and such, and 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 Wickert and Austin Wickert was an early homesteader up here, and his father had guided parties through the Yellowstone, parties of settlers through the Yellowstone in the days when they had to still worry about attack from Native Americans. But Austin, 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 the Foreman's what they call their New Maine or New Maine home now as opposed to the old original homestead cabin which was Old Maine or is Old Maine, 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?" And 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."

And we had some lodge pole pine logs, house logs out decked up and he got out his log dogs, these angled pieces of steel to hold the log from rolling, 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 boughs of his cabin. Nobody will ever see it. But it was an absolutely... I was in awe! And when he would notch the logs he had a three-quarter size cruiser's axe and 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 would 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, and then he would flip the log over and see how it fit. He would rescribe it. Then he had another little deal, it was a piece of spring from a car, a piece of spring steel, a leaf spring, but he had made two little ears on it, sharpened the ears so that he could run it alongside, once he had the log in place he could run it alongside the length of the log and it would 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 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.

And then the way we brought up the logs was just like a mast and a jib and a boom, or excuse me, a mast and a boom. It was a gin-pull type thing and we would just bring the logs in and crank it up with a block and tackle and swing it around in place and the logs went up. And then Walt Hammer built the fireplace and it's a huge...it's a massive fireplace. I think the heatilator on the living room side is 5 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. And 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 and we had a huge monster rock pile and he would go out and he would poke around and he would say 'I like this one.' He didn't say ten words in a working day other than more mortar and 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 go together.

And I would putter around when I didn't have anything to do and 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 needed help 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. And then pretty soon sometimes they would just sit and have a cup of coffee.

The other thing I remember about Austin 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 and every day or two or three days Austin would shave and I had never watched anybody shave with a straight razor before, and 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 and 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 and he's going to slice his neck. And so I asked him once, I said, "Have you ever cut yourself?" And he said, "I gave myself a pretty knick once when I swatted a fly when I had the razor in my mind." 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. [Laughs] Ruth Sondreson taught me how to square dance at the hall and 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. And sometimes there would be a caller and sometimes there would be records. But we would have oh probably four or five squares going at any one time, and Ruth I remember she just grabbed me one time and I was wanting to dance but I didn't know the first thing about it and I had two left feet. And 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. And then they would break at about 11 o'clock at night for lunch and there would be a big spread out on that big counter and everybody would eat and then they would dance for a little bit longer and then everybody would just disappear back into the woodwork. I would sit on those benches next to the Holcolms. The Funks were there, all of these old-timers, the Hansons were there, just it was 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, I didn't come, but every summer then until I started smoke jumping in 1967, so I was here until then. But it's always been a place of the heart. Those were the social activities. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July was a big deal. There was no parade but sometimes a big picnic now at Sondreson air strip. Lloyd and Ruth when I first met them had, Ray Hart talks about the old Top Hat house. That's where

they had their logging business. That was the business end of the operation and they...

Ruth's dad Charlie Durdle 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, but 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 and Charlie was the main push on trying...not trying, but on raising those buildings. But I remember Charlie at the Foreman's lake cabin. We had the floor all ripped out and so you were having to climb over the stringers, the log stringers and we were headed towards the door. And he was a crusty kind of a guy and I was 12 years old and I had been taught to respect my elders, and we both got to the door at the same time and I said, "Go ahead sir," and he looked at me with fire in his eyes and he said, "How would you like to be called a gourd head?" And I just shriveled and shrank and said, "I didn't call you a gourd head!" And he just burst into laughter and from then on he called me gourd head, and so I was always known as gourd head.

But he was a trickster and 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, and here was all this food on the table and there was this big thing of mashed potatoes right in front of me. And 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 my hand, the back of my hand right into that plate, 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's cabin Charlie made that for them just as a gift.

Debo: But it's still there?

Richard: And it's still there. Yeah, it's their little China cabinet that's in the corner.

Debo: That's great. [Laughs]

Richard: And I knew Ralph Thayer.

Debo: You did?

Richard: When I was working for the Chrismans they needed to build a new road that kind of comes in across and front of Larry Wilson's place and they needed to know where those lines were. And Ralph Thayer had run most of the lines in this country and his survey is the legal survey, and he said one day he said, "I need a stick man." I didn't know what a stick man but I quickly learned what

the stick man was. 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!" and 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... 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. And 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 Holcolm, but Harry must not have had a middle name because you see RLT and HH for Harry Holcolm when you find those corners.

Ralph he was bald as a cue ball and 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 just an amazing feat to watch him go along. A story that he's told and he told to me was the time that he was cruising timber and he stepped over a pile of logs and 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 and the bear shook the tree and he realized that there was going to be a confrontation between the two of them. And so Ralph shinnied down the tree and the bear meantime, and I think it chewed on his foot so things weren't going well for Ralph and he picked up his axe and he smacked that bear with the flat side of his axe right across the nose and the bear turned tail and ran away.

And then Ralph walked out and Ralph walked with a limp but not because of that. The reason he walked with a limp is he was coming up from town in the winter and a logging truck going down passed him and he got too far to the edge and he went down off a snow bank and spent the night wrecked in his car and 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. And 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 late 80s. They had... I think that was probably the last chivalry that was ever held on the North Fork. I don't know if you know what a chivalry is, but when folks get married and 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 bang on it and they would dance all the way around the cabin and they would bang on the pots and pans. When Ralph got remarried they had a big chivalry for him.

Debo: [Laughs]

Richard: I don't remember his wife's name. After the Red Bench Fire I came up and visited with Ruth because I had been on the Red Bench Fire and I suppose that's a story for another day. But I asked Ruth about winter time and her and Lloyd's logging operation and she told me a story about, I think they must have been up Whale Creek and they had... Their operation, they didn't usually... I don't remember them ever hauling logs out, but they sawed timbers, logs into boards and they hauled boards out. And they had a mill I think it must have been up Whale Creek in the 50s, and they had been up all winter long Lloyd and Ruth and Jack Matheson, and maybe Noni was there too, Jack's wife, and they were running real low on diesel. And they knew that they were going to have to come out and get some more diesel, but the only way to get out was they had a sled, a big sled that they hooked on behind their D9 tractor, bulldozer with some cables and then 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. And they slid these barrels on the sled all the way out the Whale Creek Road down to Polebridge, and Jack Matheson 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 there and somebody riding shotgun. But it was quite a story and Ruth not only kept the books, but she also drove a logging truck. And I don't know if it's a figment of my imagination or what, but I somehow recall that there was no door on their logging truck on the driver's side and I asked Ruth about that once and she said, "Oh that's just so I can jump out if I lose control." But I don't know if that was true or that's just something that's in my imagination.

Debo: [Laughs]

Richard: And fishing was pretty good and it was a ten-fish limit on the North Fork. Once I get better at it Orville and I would go fishing or whoever was staying at the Foreman's place and we would go and we would catch some fish and bring some up from the river for breakfast and 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, and it just didn't get better than that.

Debo: No, it sounds great.

Richard: And Helen would bake on the food stove about once a week, and so there was this smell of fresh baked bread and she made these cinnamon rolls that were die for. I have that recipe. Her daughter Peggy sent it to me because she had gotten the recipe from the cook at Yellow Bay at the Research Station on [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: So 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 Korum Ranger District which has been since been incorporated into the Hungry Horse Ranger District as a fire guard. And then in 1966, the summer of 1966 I applied to be a smoke jumper and 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. And so 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 Piles was the aka bloody. That was an inside joke of his. But the next year I did go to work as a smoke jumper and 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 quite 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, and he hired me to work on environmental documents and to substitute or to be the aerial observer when they apply air patrol during the fire season. So it was that summer of 1988 that I was... happened to be, we took off early in the morning, I think Mike Strand, Strand Aviation had the contract to fly the air patrol and so Mr. Strand and I took off and we 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. And as we started up over the Swan Range I noticed that Mike cinched down his shoulder straps and his waste strap in the airplane and we started to bounce around and I quickly followed suit. And no matter how strapped down we were I just remember we were bouncing around so much that my head kept hitting the roof, 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 and we came back and landed at the city airport. And I went back and that's when the four supervisors' office was across from city airport in Kalispell. And I walked over to the dispatch just to give them the rundown and talk about what we'd seen and just as I walked in I heard a report of a smoke on the Red Bench timber [sell] or in that vicinity. And I knew where that was and I just turned to the dispatcher and I said, "We're on our way. I'll check in when we're airborne," and we came up over that afternoon. Mike Strand and I came up over. We could see by the time we cleared city airport and over Columbia Falls we could already see some smoke coming up

in the vicinity of Red Bench. And it was probably 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 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. And 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 unglute like a jellyfish, only it was a red jellyfish. And then all of a sudden it just lifted itself out of the woods out of the trees like a basketball, like a big huge orange basketball. It just came out up in this column of smoke and the wind caught it and the basketball of fire just about a quarter of a mile downwind just dropped, and when it dropped it exploded and then there was five acres. And 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 and it just lifted up this basketball one more time and it would go [spew!] 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 and so Mike Strand said, "We need to get back to the airport." And 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 then 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, Tom Hope. I was by myself and I drove across the Red Meadow Bridge and I got up to Vic Tashney's old place. The Barnes I think have that place just north up the road from that, and I turned around and Vic Tashney's...and Vic was an old homesteader; he homesteaded here in 1919; I knew Vic Tashney as well. But I turned around in his driveway and I 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. And I could see the fire coming down the Red Meadow drainage, and as I turned around everybody else who had been up river of...up road of the fire was stopped on the bridge. And 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. So eventually everybody moved on just as the fire got to the Red Meadow Bridge and we beat feet out and got back down to Polebridge and 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. And 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; you could make that loop and the fire hadn't quite gotten there yet and still hadn't come down on the backside of Vance Hill. And I came around and I said to Tom Hope who was as I said the district ranger, I said, "Tom," and he and I

had worked a lot of fire together, and I said, "Tom we can maybe slow it down if we can backfire it from that far road," and he said, "Well let's give it a try." He asked me, "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 we started over by the Pole Bridge and we started up that road and we got as close to the far as we could. Sometimes we were just driving alongside the road, and he would drive and I would hang on the tailgate of the pick-up truck, standing on the bumper almost as fast as he could drive... I mean as 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 and once that... we just couldn't do anything about it. But the ones... 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. And 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, and Tom said, "Well Richard you're in charge." I said, "Thanks." He said, "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 and 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 and they looked at me and they said, "Will we be back?" And 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 canon mounted on the top of this truck. John Frederick and then somebody with John had decided to stay in. They were going to evacuate the... place and 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 and open it up and climb in and stay put." He said, "Okay." The Forest Service crew was running around driving that truck from cabin to cabin shooting water on the cabins and the town site and the county road crew with about... there was probably 3,000 gallons in each one of their trucks. They had these pumper trucks, tankers. And they had backed them against the gasoline pump between the Northern Lights and the merc and we had run some hose out. And these guys had never been on a forest fire before and here's this wall of smoke and ash and fire coming right towards us, and they said, "Now you'll tell us when it's time to go won't you?" And 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 Northern Lights ambers 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 harem scarum there and then all of a sudden they didn't have any water. And I was busy going back and forth as many places as I could get to and keep circling around and the pumps had stopped, and I... What's going on? Here were these 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." I said, "Do you have any gas in your trucks?" They said, "Oh yeah, we've got 5 gallons in the truck." So I ran over to the road crew truck and picked a 5-gallon Jerry can and these two trucks were parked parallel side by side with oh maybe two or three feet between them. And here I was along with a couple of guys from the road crew we were pouring gasoline into these trucks as these embers were rolling around in this vortex between the two trucks. And 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 it 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 I drove it into the meadow in front of the merc. And then I just sat there and as soon as that meadow exploded in fire and started to burn down the one in front of the merc started to burn down, or caught on fire and then I moved the truck over to the burned out meadow. And one of those guys on the road crew said, "Now Richard when is it we're supposed to go?" And I said, "That was a half an hour ago. We're not going any place. We're here for the duration." [Laughs] And 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 and just as he pulled in, and there wasn't anything we could do about the old barn, the old hay barn behind the merc. It's just too porous and too much hay in there and it just burned to the ground. But it was this 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 that had the 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 that Tom Hope and I we could see the fire was approaching this one cabin and I had a backpack pump on and we had a drip torch so that we could fire off around the cabin. And what we did was we would hide from the fire behind the cabin and then we would run out and we'd 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 and we saved that cabin and then that guy burned it down maybe a day 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. 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 and the night of our first date in White Fish we went back to her house and sat and drank tea and started telling each other North Fork stories, and we soon discovered that we had a mutual love of the North Fork. And 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 cabin 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 putting 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, but I...

Debo: Can probably hear it in your voice though.

Richard: This has... I've over the years 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. There is no place that people come back to. There was a... I was reading an article in a [Ryan] magazine just a week or so ago and there were a bunch of vignettes about where you live and they were also saying feel free to submit your article or your essay on where you live. And I said to Suzanne, I said, "I've come up with the first line. It's this is where I live but it's not where I reside because this is where I live. We reside in White Fish but we live on the North Fork," and that's the way it's become. Oh, it's just a wonderful place.

Debo: Yeah. 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: Yeah. 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 worked... I lived at the Foremans but I was working for the Chrismans and I would cross country from...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, but the Monahan place which is the place that the Chrismans bought from Bart Monahan who was the homesteader. And I never thought once about bear encounters, and that's pretty beary country, but I would fish and walk around and not pay attention. That was long before the invention of bear spray, and never had those 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: So 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 1972 when the pine beetles first appeared, about 1971, '72. The North Fork, the open stands of very mature nice big tall straight 10-inch diameter and better lodge pole pine those stands are pretty much gone. You can still see some around, a few, but that was one. The road was narrow and rough. They used to oil it and so you want to make sure that you weren't driving the road right after they oiled it because you 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 and if you needed gas, and I suspect it's the same gas pump that's tucked in the corner at the Northern Lights outside, but it was one of those hand pumps that you just pushed and pulled this 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, and 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 kept little pigeonholes and they kept a tab for everybody. And the reason they switched is the gas tank leaked into the basement of the merc and it's lucky it didn't blow the place up and burned it down, but when that happened they dug it up and that was the end of that gas pump, 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. And when we came out we would have a one week's shopping that got done to get us settled in and then we would go do the big shop. And again Helen would take out the 3-ring binder and we would go through the list and do all the things and inventories and 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. And 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 Miller and Margaret, Chuck and Margaret Miller. And her maiden name was Leibig and Margaret's father was one of the first rangers in the park and Mount Leibig just to the south of Great Northern, it's Great Northern, Grant and then Leibig that's named after him, and so sometimes we would stay at the Leibig'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, major expedition to town and we came to town and we would start pushing the carts and we would go through and we would have this stack of grocery carts, three grocery carts full of things. And I remember Orville saying, "What kind of candy bars do you like?" "Oh! Candy bars do I like? 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 and I remember that the groceries came to \$100 and I thought oh that's all the money in the world. \$100 worth of groceries and I've never seen \$100 worth of groceries before in my life. And then we would bundle them all up and bring them back and hang that bacon in a sack and the milk stayed down in the root cellar until it spoiled. And then when it spoiled I remember once coming up. Helen said, "Go down to the root cellar," and you had to climb down a ladder into the root cellar, and she said, "Bring me up the milk," and I brought the milk up and it was chunky. And 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. So.

Debo: So there's 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 and then they had a spank of glass storage batteries. Gosh, I don't know how many there were but there was lots of them so they could run all their readings lights off of those batteries. And that 32-volt generator was enough to run the motor on the agitator washing machine, so 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. And 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, and I always wanted to look good so I would put the irons on the stove and heat up the irons

and 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 shirt – I had two of them I think, maybe only one, but I was going dancing. 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 I was going to be a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, and school had already been in session for a week and my parents had already been to get my school supplies. So everybody already had friends and by then I had met Lloyd Sondreson and I wanted to be somewhere between a logger and a trapper and I wasn't sure which; I was conflicted. And so I showed up in 7<sup>th</sup> grade with my paper sack full of school supplies – what a dork. I had school suppliers 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. And I am sure my classmates looked at me like who is this guy? And I told them all I've just been in the woods in Montana and I've been fishing and trapping gophers and they looked at me like I was from Mars. And my situation didn't get better that whole year. I was kind of a misfit and that didn't help my academics at all. And 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. Yeah. 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: Oh 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 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.

01:22:06

[End of recording]