Tom Edwards

This interview was conducted by Debo Powers.

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 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 E: I was born in 1944 in Seattle, Washington, post World War II. And my folks who are at 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: Right. 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 E: My mom, Thelma Edwards, was born in Kalispell, Montana. My dad was born in Bonner's Ferry, actually a small town in Idaho and then they met in the 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, and that's my family tie and the draw for the Edwards to the North Fork was Glacier Park. So we are actually according to Larry Wilson were considered park people.

Debo: Yes.

Tom E: But we also are now you know outsiders outside the park as well because of time and [grade].

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

Tom E: No, but I stopped and figured out what year I arrived in the North Fork of the Flathead and Glacier National park and I always thought it was in the late 50s. But I decided, and I'm not using a calculator at the moment, that it was probably 1952 or 1954 because I was 8 years old. My first full summer in the North Fork at Logging Creek Ranger Station, and my folks didn't purchase property out 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 end that the family was growing up and moving on. My folks were then in the North Fork. My dad's first assignment, full-time assignment at Logging Creek Ranger Station was prior to World War II and I think it was probably 1942, and he had a one year assignment at a part-time station today, but it was a full-time station back then. And poaching was the winter occupation for a ranger and then in the summer it was tourists or [00:03:23].

Debo: Poaching or catching poachers? [Laughs]

Tom E: 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, so their ranger patrol work in the winter which you would think would be non-existent was on snowshoes and 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 the head of that cabin. Cork's Lake is a very similar situation and Bowman Lake as everybody knows is eight miles from Polebridge and there were patrol cabins all up and down the west side of the park. And I suppose the east side sat at those intervals because I can't… I have a hard time imagining snowshoeing eight miles today, but they're good snowshoes, but they skied some too.

Debo: Yeah. Well it must have been really great as a child to get to spend your summers at Logging Creek Ranger Station and the park. Are they some of your earliest memories?

Tom E: 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 40s or early 50s just because of the slower pace of life. And that's where I learned all my outdoor skills because 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 any TVs. About the most modern innovations we had was a horse and a pack mule and 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. We were a seasonal range during then but I'm sure that's changed now.

Debo: Yeah. So your first years were in Logging Creek?

Tom E: All my years were until I became an adult and then I went to work at Polebridge Merc for Ted Ross one summer and I think that was my summer of my 16th year. I got to spend two weeks at the store and I hayed the Polebridge Subdivision of today, which was a hayfield and 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, so 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 E: 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, and I to this day, some people have seen me out by my cabin in 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 and the draw in Polebridge at that time was girls. You know I would tell my mom I'm going fishing and 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 E: Yes. Polebridge was a bigger station. Had at least three families along with smoke chasers and then the kids there were able to walk barefooted on a gravel road over to the store to purchase candy. And it was the hub; it was the intersection of all the activity in the North Fork. The boys that…Walters boys that lived at Bowman Lake for the summer and the MacFarland Dude Ranch everything intersected in Polebridge and that's where relationships began and that's how you got to know people. And then as times went on we would have once a week picnics and then people from the outside of the park, the Evans would be a good example of that. The Lawsons which is from the Square Peg Ranch a lot of people would know today, we all would get together at either the Community Hall, but more than likely at the MacFarland Dude Ranch. And so 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 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. And 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. And 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 E: So another childhood story that's kind of fun and telling about the people is the Evans kids were about our same age. We were really fortunate back then that we had a nice cluster of kids that were all within… We had April Evans and Buddy Evans and then later we had Floyd Luke and Sharon Luke and then we had the gals from… You can tell I'm getting older because the names are slipping me. 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 oh boy you've really got it messed up. Then we had the two Walters boys who ended up with property in the North Fork, Pete and Dave, and then we had all of the kids from MacFarlands, and we had Gary Haverlandt, we had 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 that were at Polebridge and that was Karen, Beverly, and Paula.

So square dances for young people unlike they are today where we ended 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. But the neat thing about square dancing was back then is you had the youngest…all the McNeil boys – Allen and Bruce, I forgot them.

Debo: What about the [Fox…]?

Tom E: The [Foxes], right exactly. But see as you have different…a couple of years when you're a teenager or almost a teenager you could have different stratus 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, so 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…that 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 always seems to bring a group up and they have a great time dancing.

But we would have kids from…Karen Maas started square dancing when she was like 5 years old and we had – I wish I could think of exactly the person that was 80 back then, but we danced from 5 to 80 there was age ranges. Oh and I forgot about the Pittmans 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, and now at my age being into my 60s and semi-retired I look back at young people and I think that they get more or 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 MacFarlands and we did have a square of sub-teens and teenagers that were really a lot of fun and a lot of activity. What's MacFarlands' daughter that the [dancer]?

Debo: Was it Katie?

Tom E: You know I don't know. I remember seeing her when she was 3 years old dancing through Big Prairie, but she could dance the man's part or the girl's part and she was just enthralled to be there. And 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 Walters boys, we were young teenagers in our teens 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 and then when dinner was called late at night, which was 11 or midnight some of the kids would haul their butts to the kitchen and we always had Mary MacFarland going, "Hey, save some of 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 dependant 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. And so our moms, because the men were working, were gather all the kids together and take us out into the woods to pick huckleberries. So 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 and they had a special spot up Fish Creek or McGuiness 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 and the last Glacier Apgar took 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, and this story may sound exaggerated and I was small, 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 huckleberries a gallon to take home. The women came home after driving up country and picking huckleberries. They came home and hadn't even filled the bottom of their buckets and here we were all huckleberry-stained, and they didn't even have to leave town. They could have 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: Well tell me the story about the worms.

Tom E: Oh I forgot that. So April and Buddy Evans were from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and they had the old Adair cabin right at the t-intersection across from the Polebridge store. And because their dad was a teacher at the junior college there and their mom was a nurse, and back in the early days they outfitted in the park, the Evans' did. Well when the kids came along they brought them to the North Fork and that family always had to work, or so the way the story is that they tell. Well, because they were outside the park they could sell fishing bait and so they had a big sign on their fence that said 'worms for sale'. Well 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.

So 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. So one day I got some worms in cups and dozened 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. And 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." And I don't remember how the story went exactly, but I mean to make it good so the west side district ranger came down the road and wanted to know why there was a for sale on the ranger station fence, because he hadn't read the small print and was the ranger station for sale or were the worms for sale? And 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. That's the worm story as I remember it.

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 that went up to the North Fork. Did you?

Tom E: I did. I worked for…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 [Stone Street] and we were kind of helping him put us 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 and he said, 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." And 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, and I don't have any idea what they spent, but money to them was not a commodity that they had easy or 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, so he was a neat old-timer that I remember.

Andy [Flutch 00:21:45] whose property we purchased above Moose City was a retired ranger and he had been a ranger at the old [Ki…00:21:55] Ranger Station and at Polebridge and my dad had worked for him as a young man, a smoke chaser back when he was 17. I met him and I worked for him in his retirement setting over at the [00:22:07]. He bought a farm over there and raised cows and my first haying experience at age 12 was on Good Creek out of [Alney 00:22:14] Montana and we hayed with horses and pitchforks and a lawnmower, 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 Edna Wurtz, 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, and 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 it didn't score any points with them.

Then we move 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 and they would essentially to this day will still bring grapes to the Community Hall and different things, because she never would be caught without some sort of a contribution, and she learned the ways of the North Fork early on. Frank Evans and Edna Evans had been around the North Fork since the early 40s and were really gracious people, and Frank ended up being a grandparent to my daughter Kirsten, and 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 [pawned 00:24:04] got 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 and 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 the 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. And because he was a biologist he was fun to go in the woods with because he could answer any questions what kind of trees, species, [00:24:49], mushrooms, fishing, white fish, salmon, snagging for salmon, [alkanet 00:24:56]. He was always very friendly with all the homesteaders and the part-time residents in the North Fork because they always wanted to be able to have permission to hunt on their place in the fall when they were there. And hunting, he had a root cellar and he canned. In the winter he would go down to Mexico, Gulf of Mexico and he would can different seafood and bring it home and in his root cellar 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 helped him put up firewood.

The one story I like to tell about him 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 and he cored them and stuff 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 in Cecily McNeil's Polebridge cookbook.

In fact I'm [00:26:26] 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…1975 or '72 cookbook. So we got to reminiscing because everybody has a name in that cookbook and 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 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. So at the current time this is a cookbook that's in the works and 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 important to the pioneers as hunting is important to people now.

So that's one of the ways that this project got started. Sondresons…everybody today knows the Sondreson Hall and why we have a Community Hall and how good it is. And the story that I like, I knew Ruth and Lloyd, 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 and

at age 12 she taught me to square dance and she taught a lot of us young people to square dance. She was always really good and she could dance either the man's part or the woman's part. So what I tell about her is at age 12 when Ruth Sondreson swung me and I came off the ground that's when I learned where 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. So a lot of credit is…and a lot of people and I'm sure the name has 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?

Tom E: They milled the wood. They milled the logs for the Community Hall. And not only that, because they were there year around and they 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. And Lloyd was a pretty smart individual in his own. He had an airplane and he was a member of Flying Farmers and they wintered sometimes in Arizona and he would fly parts into for his logging operation, and so 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 E: The answer is only in the summers and the level of activity probably was more of a 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. You were here on summer vacation then you went back to school in cities around the country.

Tom E: And I went back to California. I had swimming pools, 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 E: 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 did my 50-year high school class reunion and I was from a graduating class of 302 people and our graduating

class 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. And 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. It was sold for $638-million and it was turned back into residential lots on a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay.

So I really did have the best of both worlds and the difference again 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 always were 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, an axis. 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.

And I guess as you get older you forget what was great about it when you were young. But Polebridge star, 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 know 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: So what was the North Fork road like back in those days compared to today?

Tom E: 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 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. [Chuck …00:34:36] top speed of 20 miles an hour is probably too fast. But I did have occasion to ride to town with Ted Ross took in his old beat-up pick-up to get supplies for the store, and the story that I remember there the most is we couldn't see where we were going because the cloud of dust was in front of the truck. Back then the windows were down and you at the dust and 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 3 feet in front of the pick-up, but the dust was so thick we didn't know 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 and as kids we would be sitting in their front yard by the swimming pool which has now been covered up for lack of a lawsuit. And the truckers were honk because all the kids were waving at them and the trucks would honk as they went by. The North Fork road, I mean back in the old days 1) you didn't drive fast unless you were from MacFarland 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 and much of it, 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. And 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 visitors to the mark. And then 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 or why they're there.

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

Tom E: There were phones, but phones weren't the issue, 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." So times were slower. The mail delivery was twice a week as it is now and everybody ran the mail 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 would go 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 by their table, because sometimes you didn't go to town but every two weeks. And many people in the North Fork today only go to town once a month, those that live on the far end of the North Fork.

And I think life is… Going to town every day to go to the grocery store is silliness. If you can plan your trips to town and 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. Yeah, I love that.

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

Debo: Yeah.

Tom E: Just from the time engrained in the North Fork.

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

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

Debo: So, you were in the middle of the '88 Red Bench fire.

Tom E: Oh yes. I was working; I lived in White Fish at the time. My brother went to the store and called me, Gary did, and said there is a fire in the North Fork and 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. So 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 White Fish and his name escapes me, a nice guy. He came in and ran a fire line around our homestead cabin, but when the fire jumped up Red Bench it was called, Benchmark Road, up there by Red Meadow Creek it jumped in two jumps at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The fire didn't look like it was ever going to be a threat to us, and 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 was 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 and then gosh – I can't think of his name now; that's

terrible because he died from Hay Creek – Ron Olsen, came up with a dump truck and 1,000 gallons of water to my brother's place and as the fire went over watered the place down and kept all the umbers in place, and then he turned around and got out of there and that's what saved my brother's place on the hill. And I was over at the folk's log cabin. It was the Chester Wall place and it was homesteaded and built in 1910 and that fire consumed that old cabin because it had a [hand-hued] tent double [00:42:39] rack shingle roof and 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 the 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 [00:43:08] 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 E: That was on the front page paper around the country, a 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 just 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.

And this might be a good point to interject. I think instead of wasting a lot of money fighting fires the Forest Service if they would spend a percentage, 25% of their firefighting money in fuel reduction in the forest or if the people that are really green, and I know a lot of really green people, if they 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 into lightening 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 E: I missed the ’64 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 misquotes 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, and 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 closer encounters with animals.

Tom E: 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. But as far as having…one time we had a problem with porcupines at [Kichinine 00:46:46], but you know that was kind of…we were looking for porcupine quills.

But as far as having disasters, a disaster is what you make it and if you’re not prepared, the one story that I tell and my mom could [ascount] this more, because I mentioned earlier that my folks couldn’t swim. Well 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 out left to our own devices. There was an island across from Cold Creek and a logging creek is right across from it so we were busily playing in the river, and so we walked out to the island and then oh we’re halfway through the river. Let’s get out. It’s really a big thing. We’re going to walk across the river and get to the other side. So 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 5 and he couldn’t swim. And you know even though the river is one-tenth of what it is in the spring the middle of the river is still kind of deep especially when you’re only 5 years old. And 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. And when we told the story my mom’s hair turned grayer than it had been before. And 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: Yeah. So over time, over all these years what have you seen as the biggest changes in the North Fork?

Tom E: 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, '88 to now – how many years have we passed the fire, almost 30 years.

Debo: Yeah.

Tom E: 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 get away from nature and be able to go fishing in Bowman Lake or Campbell Lake, or Cork's 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 night 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. And my daughter always says, "Well dad you can always drive to Bowman Lake," and then 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 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 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. So it's really hard to balance all of that, but I still think multiple use is the key with control, yeah.

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

Tom E: I probably have 100 of them but I forgot them so I'm going to reserve a second interview time.

Debo: Great.

Tom E: And 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 E: I hope that provides a flavor for what it was in 1952 to 2012 which is 60 years, and we're heading 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 E: Oh you're welcome. Thanks for doing this.

00:52:26

[End of recording]