

COFFEE WITH RAY BROWN

July 22, 2026

Ray: Okay, let's get started. Grab your snacks. I'll start by talking about how I got here, to this place. This is the Newton homestead, Frank and Ethel Newton. They homesteaded here in 1925. So, last year was the hundredth anniversary of the homestead for these guys. In 1976, 50 years ago, I and three buddies of mine had a pipedream to go up north to the Yukon and float the Yukon River. Which we did.

Lois Walker: These were Chicago buds?

Ray: Yes, my best friend who I went to high school with and two other friends from the neighborhood. We did that in June. We were up there on June 21st for the solstice, in Dawson City, Yukon. We floated the Yukon River for three weeks, from Whitehorse to Dawson City. After that we broke up and went our separate ways. One fellow stayed up there and went to work. Another fellow had to go back to Chicago because he had a court date. The other fellow went to Alaska, visited some people, and flew home. I hitchhiked from there, down through Banff and all that. I wound up at Chief Mountain and got a ride from one of the jammer buses, of all things, and wound up at Lake McDonald at an inholder's cabin that the Park had bought, right down from Lake McDonald Lodge. I stayed there four or five days and then made my way home. That's another story in itself. Hitchhiking back to Chicago, part way.

One fellow who I'd gone up there with got married the next year. We sat down and were talking at his reception. He asked me, "Where would you hang your hat, if you had a chance to?" I said, "I really like Glacier Park. It's really a neat spot." I didn't think too much of it. It was just conversation. Three or four months later he called and told me he was living in Bigfork. He said, "I want you to come out. I want to start a horse logging business." He had been working for E&M Logging, who a lot of you will remember. Johnny Mathison and Ed Ernst had a horse logging deal, and he was working for them. He talked me into coming out. That was in 1978.

The Newtons had corrals here. This whole place was fenced. I know Pat Elliott and Melissa Cloud remember the garden very well. It was right here where the trucks are parked. There were horses pastured here, and we'd come here to ride horses. There were some things going on with the family. I came down and met Ethel Newton, right there in front of that cabin. This was about the end of August in 1978. I was up here working for E&M myself. I was piling brush for them. As things turned out, we were able to caretake this place that first winter, the winter of 1978-79. My friend Tim and his wife stayed in the main cabin. I was in the far cabin, which used to be a lot closer to the river. We had to move it, because the river has almost taken that cabin away.

We wound up staying that winter, and I've been here ever since. Linda, who's over here, is in the family [Carol Hamilton's daughter]. They come and use it all the time in the summer. It's an extended family, the Newtons. About 1997, I made a deal with Ethel, in part trade for building that cabin on the hill. I received the 10 acres that I have, which is up there where the road splits, by the sign that says Halfway to Java. Turn down that road, and that's where my shop and cabin are now.

Jim Illich: That sounds like a better deal for you than for them. 10 acres? You've built stuff for us. I'm just curious. [Laughter]

Ray: How many acres have you got? We might have to sign a little agreement, that I might get a couple of acres from you, too. Maybe that's how I should do it anymore. Trade for acreage. It was a very fair deal for me. She wanted to help me, because I'd been caretaking for 20 years already and did a lot of stuff above and beyond, building cabins and things like that. We were really close friends. I will say, for all of these years I've been blessed, because Ethel, being the homesteader who knew all the old-timers, I got to meet a lot of those folks. I knew Frank Evans, the Elliotts, the Mathisons, Ralph Thayer, Tom Reynolds, the Gaffaneys, the Shermans, the Pittmans, Tom Ladenburg, Gus Sonnenberg, Roy Cooper. I was just blessed to know those people and something about their history.

Lois: How did you end up doing construction in the North Fork, and how did you develop your skills? I thought you were a graphic designer or something.

Ray: Well, Jim [Illich] could tell you there's no skill involved with my projects [Laughter]. I went to vocational school in Chicago. My high school was a vocational school. As part of that curriculum, the first two years you were required to take what they gave you. I had half a semester of machine shop, electricity, printing, and then art. That was my first two years. In the second two years you had to choose what you were going to do as a vocation. I chose graphic arts. Right out of high school I went to work for a graphics company in downtown Chicago, just before I moved out here. But my dad was kind of a handyman. He owned a restaurant, and he was handy, and I used to work for our landlord. I picked up basic skills about straightening nails and things like that. [Laughter] He was an old Greek landlord. A great guy. But a lot of my skill was just having a vocational background. And then just starting to do it.

Lois: Who did you work with out here? Did you work with John O'Hara, for example?

Ray: I started with John O'Hara, peeling logs for him. We were building log frames down in Tom Ladenburg's farthest south meadow, right next to the road, just before the road turns and the pavement ends. There's a meadow there. John had started doing building, and he built Tom Ladenburg's cabin for him. That's how he got his foot in the door with Tom, and Tom let us work there. Then I started scribing logs. I worked for John for about two years, then realized I knew more than he did.

Lois: Yes, the word gets around if you have talent. My question is, is there anyone in the North Fork who you have *not* done work for? Not many, I'm sure.

Ray: The smart ones.

Lois: But how did you learn electrical work, plumbing, roofing, all those things?

Ray: Just having an inert knowledge of the basics. And I do read a lot. I subscribe to all the trade journals and stuff like that. It really makes a difference. That was one of the negative aspects of public school. They did teach me how to read.

Lois: When did you set up your shop at Steve Berg's place?

Ray: Steve, when did we get the Quonset hut?

Steve Berg: 1984.

Ray: Steve had a Quonset up there, and he let me rent it from him, sorta—when I was able to pay him. Steve is history, too, and we've been very close. In 1979, Steve owned the property next door to this. The Newton homestead was 160 acres. In 1960, Ethel and Frank sold off the 40

acres that are located by Hawk Creek, which is the south end of this property, around the bend. This property goes all the way around the bend in the river south, and all the way around the bend in the river to the north. There was over a mile of frontage here. But in 1960 they sold off 40 acres to build a home down in Fontana, California, down by San Diego. Those 40 acres were then split into four roughly 10-acre lots. Over time, Steve ended up buying one, with almost 11 acres, from Kate Corona and a fellow named Leo Rowlan.

I met Steve in 1979, and we've been friends ever since. Which is a blessing for both of us. Then in 1983 he had the chance to buy the 40 acres where he is now. It was in 2006 when we took down the Quonset and put up the shop that's there now. So, this property now has 110 acres, because that 40 has been sold a couple of times, and there are the 10 acres I have at the north end of the property which was a part trade for building the cabin on the hill. But the family still has 110 acres, and it still goes all the way around the bend and is a big strip along the river. It's a wonderful piece of property, and living here for all these years I've seen a lot of wildlife and a lot of action on the river, good and bad. It's one of the prettiest spots up here, I think.

Lois: Tell us some of your early memories of the Merc and the Saloon and the North Fork Hostel, when things were hopping down there.

Ray: Yes, a lot of us here have those memories. That was 50 years ago, and they had just opened up the Saloon in what used to be Adair's cabin. I was a little bit younger, but there were a lot of people around who were relatively the same age. They were doing the same thing, escaping the cities and whatnot. There was a core group of about 30 people, so we wound up playing a lot of volleyball. We'd hike in the summer and ski in the winter. I remember playing broom ball on the icy road in front of the Mercantile. We did a lot of stuff, for sure. We'd have card nights, and for quite a while we had movie nights. It was often at John and Joyce O'Hara's place. What was interesting is that we would literally order films, actual films on a reel, and we used a projector. It was a lot of fun, with popcorn and all. That would help break up the winter.

Lois: Yes, and Frank Vitale and Ellen Horowitz, Ron and D'Ann Wilhelm.

Ray: The Chadwicks, the Uptons.

Jim Rittenburg: What did you use in the winter to get out of this driveway?

Ray: Skiing, and I had an early snowmobile. There were times when I couldn't get out. I was married to Debbie [Marotz] for eight years. We got married in 1987, and we split in 1995. Deb and I lived down here all the time, and the winters were rough sometimes. For instance, I only had two-wheel drive trucks at the time. I'd be down here, and there'd be two feet of snow and I couldn't get out. We'd just make do. But then I did get a snowmobile in about 1986. And I had a sled. I still have one of the sleds up there. We had to haul 100-pound propane bottles.

Jim Rittenburg: Did you leave a truck up at the road?

Ray: Yes, for a time we did. We'd leave a truck at the mailbox and snowcat in and out. It was an adventure. I'll tell you a story about getting stuff in and out of here. The first winter when we'd been doing the horse logging, we went to town. I bought a team of what they called green broke Belgian Clydesdale cross work horses. We got them down here, then it was snowing and we had to haul hay in and things like that. The place was all corralled, as I said, so we had these two monster horses here. When we went to town, my buddy Tim who was living here had a stock truck that he'd bought, so we went and got a load of hay for the horses. But there was too much snow, so we couldn't drive the truck down here. Tim had a brainstorm. We had one of the horses

hitched up, and there was an old aluminum boat up in the barn. We hauled that down and hitched it to the horse. It was a flat-bottomed boat, about 12 feet long. He got in the boat and said, “Go!” The horse started going, and the boat started making noise on the packed snow, which freaked the horse out. Off they went, and all I could hear all the way until I couldn’t hear anymore was, “Whoa! Whoa!” It was more like a cry. It was quite a time, but he finally got back down here. Everybody knows what draft horses look like—their feet are about this big around; we used to call them toilet seat shoes. Well, there was a hole right through the bottom of the boat where the horse had stepped on it. We finally got the horses fed, but for the next year it was like a circus.

But Peggy Gentsler could tell you. She was one of our first jobs. Jim Illich’s place was at the same time. When the Waldes owned it we horse logged that place. We took the cabin down for Jim and Alyson, but we hauled logs in for the Waldes that year.

Jack McFarland: Rex and King. Those were the horses. I only got to drive them once, and I almost died. They were incredible horses.

Ray: They were gentle, though, and they were smart. That summer when we started, they knew when it was time to go to work. So, where would we go? They wouldn’t be here—they’d be in the back meadow. There’s another 20-acre meadow back there, and they were jumping fences and all. Like I said, it was a rodeo for the first bit. Sometimes they would come to oats, but most of the time we’d be chasing the horses down for half of the day. It was a lot of work.

Lois: Tell us about the hockey rink in Polebridge and how you came to coach hockey.

Ray: The coaching is more current, but the rink was earlier. It was down there across from the Hostel. Bless Steve Weber’s heart—he just sent me a photo of us working on the rink, one that I’d never seen before. I don’t remember the year we built it, but the 1988 fire took it out. Ron Wilhelm built the first rink we used. He and D’Ann used to own the Ben Rover cabin, and he worked his butt off building a rink down there. Then we built one up at Jerry Costello’s place. Because there was a slough there by John Stone’s place—I think it’s filled in now, but it was there at the bend in the road. We skated there for a time. Bill Brown used to take his truck out there with his plow and push the snow so we could skate there.

Anyway, I got word one time, because I started making friends in town who were hockey people. I only learned to skate and play out here. But I got word that there used to be a rink down by the city airport in Kalispell, near Rosauers at the south end of town. It was there for a couple of years, but it was taken down and stored where the animal shelter is now in Demersville. I got wind of it and went to talk to Fish and Game, because I think it was on their property. I inquired about it, and I told the fellow in charge what I wanted to do, to set it up in Polebridge. The guy said, “You’ve got it. It’s yours. Take it. If you can get it out of here, it’s yours.” He told me go to Wiseman’s, because they’d lost the bolts that held the 8-foot panels. I did that, and Randy, the guy who did poles for Larry Wilson (Rosenbaum or some name like that), he had a big truck and he brought them up for me. Berg and Weber were there. A bunch of us put that together.

Lois: Did you drill a well to get water for the ice?

Ray: No, I can’t remember how we did that. But we flooded it, and we were able to play on it a few times. Back then the weather was so iffy. We might have a few weeks to do it, but then it would get warm or it would rain. But then the 1988 fire burned down $\frac{3}{4}$ of the boards. I remember Ivan Windsheimer saying, “Hey, can I take what’s left?” He built like a little carport

by his place, down on Skyline. I think it's still standing, in fact. But after that, I started playing hockey in town.

But I have to tell you this story. It kind of made me mad. I'm not going to mention the name, but this guy was telling me about the rink. He said, "Yeah, so-and-so and I did all the work on that rink." He didn't know that he was talking to the guy who actually did it. I didn't say anything—I just kept nodding my head. It's funny how things evolve and people take credit for something they shouldn't. But I was stunned when he said that. I said, "Well, that's good. I'm glad you did that."

Lois: Did you ever skate down Vance Hill?

Ray: No, that was not me.

Lois: I have a picture of John O'Hara and Ron Wilhelm skating down the hill. What are your memories of the making of Heaven's Gate with Michael Cimino?

Ray: Yes, I was here for that. Joe Novak wrote his book about life in the North Fork, and I told him a funny story about that. That's when we were horse logging. There was a group of us down at Peggy Gentsler's place down by the river. One guy, Joe Masters, had a tepee set up. He had a baby and a pregnant wife, and they were living in the tepee. It was by the old ford, going over to the McFarland place. We were doing our logging, and a guy came walking up to us. I'll never forget his name—Ronald McDonald. He was a big, strapping guy. He introduced himself, "I'm the site locator for Heaven's Gate movie. We're going to be doing a scene in the movie right here where you guys are, down on the river, a river scene." Okay, so what? "We'd really like for you to get your stuff out of here for a couple of days while we shoot." We said, "Okay, but it's gonna cost you." We made a deal with the guy.

Jack McFarland: How much land did you get for it? [Laughter]

Ray: That involved moving the horses and not being able to work for a couple of days. They made us a cash offer. Then he said, "What about that tepee? You're going to have to move that tepee." Joe said, "That's my tepee." The said, "What's is gonna take to get you to move that tepee?" I remember looking at the guy, and Joe said, "What about \$300, and a six-pack?" The guy said okay, and sure as shit, about three days later here he came walking down. He gave Joe the \$300."

To finish the story about the movie, I was in town the day they all pulled in. Kris Kristofferson was there, and Isabelle Huppert, the French actress. In the scene they were shooting she was swimming in the river. Kris Kristofferson was right down there. She came out of the river and said, "Come on in. It's nice." We're thinking the river must be about 36 degrees. They were shooting these scenes—like I said, I wasn't there, I just heard the story, but I knew it was true. They were about halfway through and Cimino said, "Cut! Cut! Goddamn it, cut!" Everyone was looking around, and it turned out that guy Joe was up in one of the trees watching the naked lady in the river. "Get him out of there," Cimino says.

Lois: Then Cimino bought property down there by the river, right? And some of it is still in family hands.

Ray: There's still an acre or so, and a year or so ago his daughter was here. Yes, he owned property up on the top of Red Meadow East, where Ed Langton owns now. He owned all of that—168 acres or so, with two amazing wells. There was a small brush fire there that we put out

during the movie shooting. When we were logging we had a little 350 dozer, and I remember going over and helping cut fire lines up that hill, right where the fence is at. There are a lot of stories about that movie, for sure. They shot up by Tepee Lake. The big war scene was here at what used to be Rachel Sweet's property. Mark Boyd owns a lot of it now, and Wayne Benson used to own some of it.

Lois: They shot up at the border. Larry Wilson talks about cutting down trees on Tepee Lake Road and taking them up to the border. There were some things that Cimino didn't want visible in the background in the film. So, they stood the trees up to block things that would otherwise would have shown up in the camera.

Ray: It was the opposite, too. Up here at what was Leo Rowlan's place up on the hill, overlooking the river. They did a baseball game up there in the meadow. He actually paid, and Larry Wilson came and did the work. There were a bunch of larch snags from the Red Bench Fire. He paid Leo Rowlan and I don't know who else to cut down the larch snags, because he didn't want them in some of the scenes.

Karen McDonough: We got the Bridge to Nowhere. That's where Kris's cabin was. The actress would come across the bridge with her little horse and wagon. They'd say "Stop!" If they did that once, they did it a hundred times. They'd all jump out and take the horse back across the bridge.

Ray: Yes, Cimino was quite the perfectionist.

Karen: But I think my dad's favorite thing about it was that Cimino brought dust from California.

Ray: Yes, Fuller's earth. Flatbed trucks full of it with bags of dust, 50- or 80-pound bags.

Karen: To put in front of the fans. That's why when you watch the movie it almost hurts your eyes. But that was California dust that he brought in. If you come up today, you can still see the bridge.

Ray: That was quite a year.

Lois: What was your involvement in fighting the 1988 Red Bench Fire?

Ray: I helped the Wernicks. The fire crept right over there by Peggy's and Megan's place and was creeping over the hill. Because the Wernicks lived on the hillside, and they had a lot of big trees on their place. And a lot of duff, and the fire was creeping through the duff. I had been doing work for Doc Pete who owned the place he had bought from the Rowlands. I was building for him at the time. I remember sitting on his deck and seeing the fire creeping. I went and helped the Wernicks for a while. They were really lucky, because that's when it crossed the river and went right through Big Prairie. I was more scared than anything.

Lois: You had just built the snow roof over our trailer and put in the outhouse. We came up right after the fire and pulled in. I just knew it was all going to be gone, but it wasn't.

Ray: Yes, it split and went around you. I remember that first night when it happened. I was with Peter Moore, Jerry Costello, and somebody else. Peter was just beside himself. It was headed right toward his place, right down Red Meadow to his studio. I remember Jerry driving us down to Polebridge. People were gathering at the Saloon. Peter said, "You people on the bench, at the top of Vance Hill, had better get your shit ready, because that fire is heading your way." A lot of people chuckled, but that's right where it hit the next morning. It went right on

down Red Meadow and down that bench, and got a lot of houses on the bench. Peter just had that gut feeling. It was coming straight this way, then it was about midnight and I was out on the road watching. The wind shifted. It was going straight east, then it shifted south. That was about 1:00 in the morning.

A couple of people were lucky. Jerry Costello had hosed his house down, and saved his place.

Lois: Yes, he had a sprinkler going.

Ray: Yes, and places burned on both sides of him. I had just finished a project for a guy down there. In my cynical way, I called him. Howard Manchel—he was retired attorney from Atlanta. I had just finished putting the interior in a cabin that he had bought. I had literally just finished it, and I called him. I said, “I have good news and bad news.” He asked, “What’s the good news?” I said, “I finished the job.” “What’s the bad news?” “You’re never going to see it.” I told him the fire had gone through. He asked, “Did we save anything?” Even the refrigerator was just a pile of aluminum—that’s how hot the fire was when it went through there. Thousands of degrees. I felt like an idiot talking to him like that, but it was the truth. He was right out there on the same bench, near Jan Caldwell.

Jim Rittenburg: Did you get paid?

Ray: I did. He’s a lawyer. I would have had to sue him. He’s a good guy—he understood, because I had money in materials and stuff.

Audience member: Looking at this view, out across the river, has anything changed at all? Maybe the river a little bit? What has changed in 50 years?

Ray: Actually, quite a bit. First of all, the 1995 flood. The water was up here on this trail, to start with. I don’t know if you can see it, but there’s a man fishing over there on that rock ledge on the Park side. That was the bend in the river in those days. The flood took that whole bend out and cut in some over in this corner. But the river would turn sharply back then, where that guy is. I watched it happen. There was a torrent just coming down. The level of the river is just about two feet below the bank here. That’s how high it was. I remember watching big trees like these just falling over, 100 feet at a time and washing down the river. So, this got washed out. There used to be about 40 feet more that way, and there was another little bench right here that got washed out. A lot of that was over time, but a lot of it happened in 1995.

Because it’s all gravel. And big trees with big root balls would come down like grinders and hit the bank. You could just hear it—it was very loud. It lasted for just about seven hours, didn’t it, Pat? It came and went within about seven hours. But it did a lot of damage. The Cole place was under water, right up to their deck, right Pat? The whole meadow was under water, up to the Weber place. Berg is a little higher up, so he was lucky. But we still find batches in the timber where the mud is washed up.

Pat Elliott: I think the Hohnbergers were canoeing out in that meadow.

Ray: Yes. I remember we were up there when the Harshmans, in their little Samurai, tried driving through it. The road was under water. They floated down a ways. And there was a Canadian helicopter flying around that day, like a search and rescue crew. We got word that Lee Secrest was trapped on his roof. He has a big cabin, so I wondered how the water could get that high. We went up, and they were canoeing things in and out. It turned out it was Lee Downes who put the word out. Well, if everybody knows Lee Downes, he was $\frac{3}{4}$ deaf. He had talked to

Lee Secrest, and what he said was, "I've got water to the top of the root cellar." I remember going in and asking, "Lee, are you all right? Lee Downes said you were on your roof." He said, "No, I said the water was over the root cellar." Everything was okay.

Lois: Someday, I want to start south and north and have you tell me all of the people you've done work for over the years.

Ray: What? Are you going to tell the tax man?

Lois: But, of all the projects you've done, which was the biggest and most outstanding? Which ones are you most proud of today?

Ray: I've got too many customers here today to divulge that. They're *all* the best.

Lois: I know you've done a lot of work out on Red Meadow East.

Ray: Yes, a couple of cabins down there.

Lois: Did you ever do work for Ladenburg or Downes?

Ray: Nope.

Lois: Did you ever do work on Sondreson Hall?

Ray: A few times. My buddy Berg and I did a lot of volunteering over the years. And we did a lot of stuff for the fundraisers.

Lois: You've done work for the Evans family.

Ray: Yes, for Frank Evans when he was around, and for Bud and April. Odds and ends. We even got paid. You know, if it was for Frank he would trade for canned goods.

Lois: Did you build Bob Grimaldi's place?

Ray: I did the extensions on it. Tom and Joan Hedin, who are not here. Frank and Jean Chesley, who likewise aren't here. I did a lot of work for them over the years.

Lois: The Illiches?

Ray: Yes, Jim and Alyson, a lot of stuff there.

Lois: You did some stuff for Joe Franchini.

Ray: Yes.

Lois: Did you ever work for Ray Hart?

Ray: I did, early on. I built him an outhouse.

Lois: Hollensteiners?

Ray: I think some little odds and ends for Andrew when he was around.

Steve Berg: Don Sullivan.

Ray: Yes, a lot of stuff for Don Sullivan. When I first went out on my own, I did a lot of stuff for Don and Sue. I almost lived up there for about three years. That's how I became real close friends with Tom Reynolds.

Lois: That's where Bill and I got our trailer, from Bud Holcomb. You took me up to see it and then hauled the trailer down to our place and built a snow roof over it for us.

Ray: I did work for Joe Bush, over the border.

Lois: Yes, I meant to ask you about Joe Bush, because you, he, and Tom Reynolds all had October birthdays, didn't you? You'd celebrate together.

Ray: I see a question back there. Go ahead, Alyson.

Alyson Illich: You don't have to name any favorites, but what's been your most memorable job, bad or good?

Ray: I have to admit that the first real log cabin that I did on my own was for Tom and Joan Hedin. It's a cute place, and it turned out really good. I kind of use that as an example when people want to come look at my work. It was a first one, that turned out really good. I never admit mistakes, of course.

Lois: Did you do any work on Trail Creek?

Ray: Oh, yes. Tom and Susie Kratt. I finished their place. We spent the whole winter up there. Deb and I lived there and put that whole thing together. And I sold Diane Boyd her cabin.

Lois: Out of Sondreson Meadow.

Ray: Yes. I can't remember the exact timeframe, but there was the period when they were buying properties for the Wild and Scenic River corridor, and people were selling their properties. Loyd and Ruth Sondreson had a big metal shop building, the old homestead cabin, and their big A-frame. It went up for bid. I put in a bid with the Forest Service to take the buildings down. A buddy and I bid on the buildings. We didn't get the A-frame—we didn't even bid on it, but I got the bid for the homestead, and then a friend of mine from Wisconsin got the big shop. Diane Boyd got the word. To make a long story short, she bought it from me and I helped her take it down and move it up to her place. I think Rob Fisher helped her finish it, didn't you?

Rob: Way back when.

Ray: In the mid-1980s, maybe?

Rob: Early 1990s, maybe.

Steve Berg: Wouldn't the most memorable cabin be the cabin right up here on the hill, because you earned the deed to your ten acres once you reached a certain stage on the construction?

Ray: That would certainly be the most important, as far as the part trade for building that cabin for the Newtons.

Steve: And what did you have to do to qualify to get that deed? How about the roof completion?

Ray: Yes, it was in stages, certain levels of completion, just like you do on most building contracts. You get paid at certain levels. But it wasn't quite done yet, and my good buddy Berg sent out the paperwork and said, "Look, he's pretty well done with it. Sign here for the ten acres," so that worked out really well. The term we use is "strongarm."

Steve: Actually, the deed was signed by her in the early stages of the construction, and I held the deed until you reached the completion of the roof, which qualified me to turn it over to you, so you could then file it with the Clerk in Kalispell and Ulm.

Ray: Yes, that's it exactly.

Steve: But we were worried about what, exactly, you may recall? She might pass away before we got through.

Ray: Yes, we were afraid she might kick the bucket, but it worked out well. Certainly this has been a good memory, because I've been able to use it over time.

Jim Illich: How many structures have you been involved with building or modifying, from woodsheds to cabins and outhouses?

Ray: I remember working for the Lundgrens at the border, and working for Joe Bush at the border. Don Sullivan, which was Tom Reynolds' place. I put a temporary foundation under Tom's cabin, because it was sinking into the ground. Then we built the guest cabin for Tom's uncle. Then I built another couple of storage sheds and rebuilt the original McAfee homestead cabin, which was tiny. I was at the Sullivan place for almost three years. Then working my way down. I kind of lose track, for sure.

Jim: Approximately how many? 20, 50?

Ray: If you count all of the structures, probably at least 50.

Lois: I have noted Wernick, Cimino, Clark Helton, Illich, Hedin, Peter Moore.

Ray: No, Peter did his own stuff.

Lois: Ray Hart, Joe Franchini, Ed Langton, Hollensteiner.

Ray: Oh, there were other people at the border. There was a guy named Stevens who had an A-frame up there. And I did odds and ends for Ed Langton at the border.

Lois: Diane Boyd, Steve Berg, Webers, Novak-Reardon, Gary Byers, Grimaldi, the Martin boys.

Ray: I did a lot of stuff for Bud and Eunice James down on Deep Woods. And Jerry and Andrea Curless who were in there first, and now on their place on Moose Creek.

Lois: Taylor, Kummerfeldt, Pittmans.

Ray: For the Pittmans I changed some lights, then I also did some logging there. I'm still working on the Taylor place. That's a long-term commitment.

Lois: Stan Stahr?

Ray: Nothing for Stan yet, but he wants me to do some stuff.

Lois: Chadwicks, Rose Greene, Jim Rogers, Olsons.

Ray: There was a lot of stuff on the bench, going in to Costellos. I did stuff for Tom Riemer. And Donald Beckman.

Lois: Anyone up on Neneman's Bluff?

Ray: I think I did some stuff for Hollensteiner up there.

Lois: Wally Donaldson (no), Chris and Monica Graff (no), Mid Connelly (no).

Ray: Mark and Sarah Ferris, a couple of buildings for them, a big shop and a log cabin, right here by Whale Creek. I did stuff for Joe & Barbie Kuzma, and a little bit for Tom and Betsy

Holycross. Minor plumbing stuff. But structures, and a lot of little outbuildings and stuff for many people.

Richard Wackrow: I remember you tore our outhouse down and took the hinges.

Ray: Yes, those are the Illich hinges now. I charged them for new ones. You're right, one of the first septic systems I did was for Richard and Gerry, up on the Medlin estates. He bought the old Marsh place. Remember, there was tarpaper on the windows? And they never did fix the floor, even when Keith and Pam owned it. You'd hear the china rattling.

John Preston: You did our septic in 1983.

Ray: Yes, so I'm a sewer guy. I got my license way back when.

Pat Cole: Shoemaker, Ray.

Ray: Yes, I built Richie's cabin after it burned, when he first bought it, up on Tepee Flats. And the Halseys, Kevin and Kenna. I did a couple of buildings there.

Lois: So, you've done work for more people than not. There aren't many people you haven't done work for. Did you do anything for the McFarlands, out on Big Prairie?

Ray: No, they're too cheap.

Lois: Oh, is that it?

Jack McFarland: I have question. Of all the stuff you've done, from an engineering perspective what was the most challenging?

Ray: The Lockwoods on Numa Peak Lane. Bob and Jackie Graham had a little odd-shaped, octagonish cabin that they had built, and a couple of little outbuildings. Then Steve and Suzanne Lockwood bought it and had it engineered. They were university people, and their good buddy was an architect out of Havre, and he came up with a set of plans that made you want to cross your eyes.

Lois: It is an odd-shaped house.

Ray: It's an odd lot, too, shaped funny by the way they built originally. Then you have to consider the well location, sewage location, setbacks and things like that. We had to design it with a turn. It was tricky. I had some questions, because we were tying the new building to the old building. The new building was massive, with three stories and a dance hall upstairs that seemed very big. I had a question about some of the turns and whatnot, to frame that in right. I asked the architect, "How do I?—I don't see it on the drawing how to do this." He said, "Hey, you're a carpenter. Figure it out." Which we did, and it's great. That was a challenge, because we had different kinds of BCIs and pitches on turns and things like that.

The Taylor place is another tricky one. We had to take the old cabin and rebuild it, then added new to the old, bigger, so it's a T-shape. From the old section, going to the new section, typically a nice pitch is like an 8/12 pitch, for snow load and whatnot. Again, I had an engineer who was helping a little bit. I remember sitting down at the Pizza Hut with Will Taylor and my buddy Matt, who's an engineer out of Whitefish. Matt said, "It would be kind of neat if you went from an 8/12 pitch to a 6/12 pitch, to make it look different." Rob, you would know about that, going from pitch to pitch on a thing like that. It's not easy. I remember scratching my head and going, "Thanks a lot, Matt." Will was like, "Yeah, that's a great idea. Let's do that." So, that took some

time, if you think about how you want to do that. Things like roof pitches can be a real challenge that throw you for a loop at times. But that's what makes it fun.

Lois: Have you maintained a list of the projects you've worked on?

Ray: No, not really. As I said, I have people coming up to me and saying, "Remember when you did such-and-such for us?" And I say, "No."

Lois: How about the Piemontes—the Dust House (no), Puglielli (no).

Ray: Chesters, when they built. I don't know who owns it now. I did do a bunch of work when Jim and Dawn Gaitis were here. They had Bud Fishel's place back where the Rittenburgs are now. With the big slanted roof. Is that yours now, Jim?

Lorna Rittenburg: Yes. Would you like to change that pitch?

Ray: It's a shed style, as I recall.

Jim Rittenburg: Did you do that?

Ray: No, I did some repairs on it, though. I think it was when Bud still had it. I think he had it built. Then Jim and Dawn had it for a while.

Jim Rittenburg: Would you like to come back again?

Ray: After I get finished with the Curless place.

Jim Illich: Any amazing, terrifying, fascinating wildlife encounters? And the largest trout you've ever caught here.

Ray: I have pictures of it, but not here. I got like a 23-inch cutthroat out of here years ago. A big spawner. That's the biggest one I've ever caught. I've caught bull trout here over the years. There's one wildlife story I'll never forget. I was sitting at the Sullivans one day after work, up at the border. The first thing I started on was the old McAfee cabin—we had to put a floor in it and a roof on it. I was there all by myself, sitting there. It was still light out; it wasn't that late in the day. It was in September, I think. It was the first time I ever heard a bull moose bellow. They sound like a cow. I didn't know what it was, but I heard something coming up the hill. Has anybody heard the sound they make when they're in rut? It's like a big cow grunt sound. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't see anything, but it kept getting closer and closer. Here came this big bull moose, right up past me, just bellowing away. He was in rut, and he was bellowing for a cow. He walked right by me. He never looked up.

I've had bears come close and things. I've had bears right here. One time I was down here, not that long ago, with Max, Bob Grimaldi's old black poodle. Here came two two-year grizzly bears and their mom. They came right up through the garden area and were feeding around right outside the window. Max was outside, and one of those cubs chased him. It was kind of loping around him. He ran all the way around the building, with the cub chasing him. Then he came around again, and I opened the back door, and he couldn't have come in any faster, into the cabin. The cub just stopped and went back to eating grass. I could literally hear those bears pulling the grass, right out through the window. Then they went up on top of the hill, and I had to go back down to my cabin. But that was some pretty close stuff.

Jerry Curless: Ray, you had a picture of a mama and cub on our place.

Ray: Yes, when they just got their place and we were finishing their guest cabin on Moose Creek. It was later in the fall, remember? It was cold. I was there, and here came a mama grizzly bear, and I think she had more than one cub, although we only saw one. It was blond, like their dog, almost white. I got a perfect picture of the mom and the cub, and I took it down to the *Hungry Horse News*. I think it wound up on the front page, didn't it?

Andrea Curless: Yes, it did.

Ray: That was one blond grizzly bear. I think maybe over time they do darken, but I'm not sure. It was a great photo, and we got a little bit of ink, as they say.

Lois: I need your birthdate and place.

Ray: No.

Lois: I know you have an October birthday.

Ray: Yes, October 20th. [1954] I was born in Chicago, at home. I was just back there for my brother's funeral, and I went and saw the house where I was born. It's a little place. I got a picture of it and showed Berg. Guess where I was born. I think it was 914 or 714 W. Montana Street. Isn't that bizarre. It's on my birth certificate.

Lois: Do you have siblings?

Ray: There were seven of us, and I just have two sisters left, back in the Chicago area. I just lost a brother in January.

I guess Rob Fisher was asking what would make his session interesting. We'll be doing his next.

Rob Fisher: Yes, in three weeks, at my cabin on the Evans property. I came to see how you had yours laid out, to see how I might lay mine out. We've all been up here so long. I'm curious, and I'm sure we're all curious, how did we get here? What do we have in common that keeps us here? And your story of how you were up in the Yukon, and the adventure—for a lot of us it was the adventure to strike out from the big cities and look for something small, where we could be part of the fabric of the community.

Ray: Sure. That's what you should do—become part of the fabric.

Rob Fisher: Yes. In bigger cities you don't necessarily have that chance.

Ray: I really needed to get out of that city, for sure. I have open spaces in my heart, you know. Even when I was in high school I was gone out of the city. Even when I worked at the art studio, I would be gone. That's a funny story, too. I worked at the art studio for four years before I came out here. I would bow hunt every weekend during bow season. We'd go up to Wisconsin. I was out camping all the time. I'll never forget. I quit a couple of times, and my boss would say, "Okay, if you're gone a week or so you can come back." But it was my second year at the art studio when I told my boss that I was quitting, that I was going to the Yukon to float the river. He looked at me. He was a great guy and good people. He said, "I'll hold your job for you if you'll promise to be back here by the first of September." So, I did, and when I got home I had a job. Then, when this came up in 1978, two years later, I finally hit him again that I was leaving. The first question out of his mouth was, "How much? How much of a raise do you really want?" I said, "No." He asked, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm moving to Montana, and I'm going to be a horse logger." He said, "No, you're not." The next thing he said was, "Give me my keys."

Lois: When did you start the tradition of bringing the ham to Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners at the Hall?

Ray: Steve, didn't we start that when you were still doing it?

Steve Berg: Yes.

Ray: People had been taking turns.

Steve: It was in the vicinity of seven or eight years ago.

Ray: Other people would do it once in awhile. One tradition I'm proud of, though, is reading the Declaration of Independence at the 4th of July parade. I get a lot of compliments on that, and I think it's important that we do that. A lot of people have never heard it read.

Lois: And you ended up doing a lot of bike riding, didn't you?

Ray: Yes.

Audience member: In your 50 years here, was there ever a moment in time when you thought you might leave the North Fork? Or did that never cross your mind?

Ray: Do you know who Greg and Beth Puckett are? When I first met them, he asked me to do some work down there for them. It was all fenced in at the time, because it used to be where they were drilling the oil well. I jokingly said, "This goddamn North Fork. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm getting the hell out of here as soon as I can." To this day he still reminds me of that.

Lois: The well drilling was in 1989. Jerry Costello built the Home Ranch Store in 1990.

Ray: But no, it's just home. I've been blessed to have these people let me caretake the property and make a home here. I was married right here. We've been separated for awhile, but we're still friends. She wanted to start a family, and I didn't. She now has a family. She has grown kids already. But I remember telling Deb, "We live up here, and it just isn't conducive to kids." Maybe that's a selfish thing. What happened was, and I tell that story too, when that old biological clock started ticking, she was going to have kids. That was part of the reason we split, but we're still friends. I've worked on her house down in the valley a couple of times. I did some major remodeling and stuff.

Steve: While we're on the subject of marriage, do you remember the beginning of the marriage and the location of the ceremony, and the method of getting to the location, and the conversation with your brother Frank as to the mechanics of getting your mom there, on time, to the ceremony? Just to jog your memory.

Ray: I don't remember. [Laughter]

Audience member: Yes, Ray, the people who stood in the sun for three hours, we remember.

Ray: It was early September, and the plan was to get married beneath the old juniper tree out in the meadow behind these trees a ways. Debbie and I took a rowboat and walked out there. But my brother, who came from Chicago with Mom and a couple of other relatives, had a plan where there would be a caravan going down the road and across the bridge at Polebridge, then come back north across Big Prairie. Jerry Desanto was officiating and was the talker, then Judge Keedy was there. But my brother got backed up a little bit, and when he got across the bridge he turned right, instead of turning left. He went south on the Inside Road. And it was a warm, sunny day.

Steve: It was boiling!

Ray: We were all dressed up, saying, “Where’s Mom? Where’s my brother Frank?” Regi Altop was on the radio, and finally we got a call back saying that they were in West Glacier. “Well, tell him to turn his ass around and get back up here.” They finally got there, and he was hanging his head. It was like two hours, wasn’t it? What were we going to do? Go over and start eating and then come back again?

Steve: Two *long* hours.

Ray: Then, bless his heart, Tom Riemer was our row master. We had a row boat, and it said “Just Married” on the back. But same thing—that made the newspaper. What did the *Hungry Horse News* call it? The Romantic Row?

Steve: It showed the boat, in the river, being ferried back and forth. If I can prompt your memory on another subject, and that is Cimino. Were you not an employee at one time? And you somehow came across some magnificent white tablecloths, which somehow made their way to the NFIA [North Fork Improvement Association]? Do you know anything about that?

Ray: Nope. [Laughter] I sure don’t. You’re a little confused on that; I hate to correct you. Those tablecloths were really nice, beige silk-like material. Actually, I got the fabric at an auction. I used to go to the auction all the time—that’s how I got half of the junk I have. There was a fabric place that was going out of business. There were like four tables full of big skeins of nice fabric. They asked for a bid on all of it, but no one bit. So then they decided to sell it by the roll. I was the first one to raise my hand. I said, “\$10.” I walked up, and I saw this big, beautiful roll of fabric. I grabbed one and started to walk off, and the man said, “Just one?!” I said that was all I wanted. Steve Berg’s ex-wife turned that fabric into tablecloths, and we had them at the community hall for years for Thanksgiving and Christmas. There’s probably pictures of them somewhere. Afterward we’d fold them up. I think what happened one year was that one of the families that hosted was taking the tablecloths to clean, which a lot of people did. They ended up putting them in the same type of black bag as the garbage. They got to the landfill and pitched the whole shebang. I’m pretty certain that’s what happened.

Lois: What are some of your favorite hikes?

Ray: Nasukoin. How many times have we done that, Steve? We would leave a vehicle at the end of Moose Creek one afternoon. We’d come around the next morning and leave real early. We’d drive up to the Link Lake parking lot, go up to Link Lake, sometimes go down to the lake and fish, then head back over the old trail to Moose Creek and back out again. I’ll bet I’ve done that seven or eight times. It’s just a great hike. I don’t remember ever running into bears. I do remember one time Linda Pittman was with us. When you get up on top and are looking down the face of Nasukoin, instead of going the long way around we decided to go down that scree run, because you can see pretty much where the trail is going to go. There was Linda—this was seven or eight years ago, and she’s no spring chicken. She was amazing. She went right down. Over time a bunch of us have done it. So, that’s my favorite, for sure. We’ve done everything in the Park. Berg and I have done a lot of stuff in the Park. He tried to kill me one time.

Rob Rego: Only once?

Ray: No, actually there were a couple of times, come to think of it. When I first met Steve we did a day hike—Boulder Pass, all the way around Kintla Lake and up over the pass, back over toward Hole in the Wall, back out Brown’s Pass and Bowman Lake. We did get a ride from the head of Bowman Lake. I believe it was 24 miles in one day. Tom Riemer picked us up in the

boat. Should I tell them about our mutiny trip up in Canada? You talk about bicycle trips. The Elliotts remember it very well. You used to be able to go across the border a lot. I had made a recon trip with Clark Helton and my ex-wife. We drove up and all the way around and came down to what they call Beaver Mines. There's a lodge there at the Gladstone Guest Ranch. I talked to a guy sitting there and said, "We want to do a bike trip." And the guy said, "There's a shortcut to the Gladstone Ranch." I think he had a napkin or something, and he drew. He said, "You go this way. You have to go through a couple of meadows, but you'll get here, and you'll probably save seven or eight miles, because it's going to be a long day." I think it was close to 40 miles. On our mountain bikes.

So, we were going along, and it was getting warmer and it was late. We were starting to put on some miles. We got to where we were supposed to turn off and follow this guy's suggestion. We were getting tired. We ran out of water, and everyone was getting a little bit edgy. We got to the base of a hill about 5:00, after a long day. I looked, and it said, "About a quarter mile at the top of this hill, there should be a gate, and after that you should see the lodge." I think it was John Elliott who said, "Brown, I'm going to walk up there, and if I don't see a gate I'm going to come back and I'm gonna kill you." I started getting nervous. About five minutes later he yodeled, "Yes, come on, this is it." We had a great time after that. Walter was with us at the time. And Sam and Val Cox and Jerod Hope. That was a semi-mutiny. We've had a lot of trips like that.

Steve: It should be said, for the audience, that it's astonishing to think that you could bike from the North Fork Road, in those days, penetrate the border, get into B.C., immediately turn east, ford the river, continue east paralleling the international boundary, come to Akamina Pass, pass into Alberta, and you find asphalt and an eight-mile trip down into the town of Waterton, stay there overnight, take a rest day the following day, and then on the third day reverse course and come home. That's a distance that seems incomprehensible today, but we did it by bike.

Ray: Yes. Because these were old seismic roads, especially the middle Kootenay Pass, the Akamina-Kishenena. Where they'd done seismic testing.

Lois: We were going to have a loop road.

Ray: It was like a road for a while, and then they kind of closed them off. Now they're bike trails and hiking trails. They're still there. Remember one time we went over to the Cameron Lakes that way.

Lois: I don't know when you had time.

Ray: That's why sometimes people would say, "What's taking so long building?"

Lois: And I know you do cross-country skiing.

Ray: Yes, and we winter camped. A few times; not much. We had some adventures. Nobody had good equipment back then. But yes, we'd go up to the end of Moose Creek. Berg and I stayed up at Ninko Cabin and winter camped there. We skied up behind there into the Thompson-Seton Basin. That's why we live here. To do stuff like that, I'd say.

Jim Rittenburg: Did you ever stay at the Grizzly Inn?

Ray: I've been there quite a few times. That's where we'd stop on our way back from Nasukoin. We'd poke around. And then Rich Clark used to leave hay in the cabin for his mules and a bottle of hooch. He's still around. He furs for Rob down in town. He's the guy we talked

about who cleared up Wedge Canyon, the old furrier. We did a lot of stuff over time. Not like Mark and Margaret Heaphy, though. Boy, those guys like to hike.

Jack McFarland: What are some changes that you're glad happened over the years?

Ray: Well, this thinning is a good deal, firewise. I don't know—not much comes to mind.

Steve: How about the establishment of zoning?

Ray: I hadn't really put much thought into it, to be honest. I'm just kind of lazy in that regard. I don't like to see more traffic and stuff like that. That's not a plus.

Lorna Rittenburg: When are you going to bring hockey back to Polebridge?

Ray: I'm looking for donations. Gotcha! Actually, I'm starting to wind down. I got hurt a couple of times, and I'm slowing down a little bit.

Lorna: That might be good for the rest of us.

Steve: Actually, Steve Weber and I came up with the idea of having Ray on retainer. We each pay Ray X amount of dollars each month to give us top-dog attention when needed.

Ray: I call it concierge service. And believe me, they keep me busy. I think it works out real well, though.

Audience member: Ray, on the Cimino thing, weren't you a cowboy at Browning during the movie? Tell us the story. You hauled horses or something over there.

Ray: No, but I remember working on another movie. Back in 1987, when I moved my folks out here, I bought a moving truck. My brother and I went to an auction and bought a truck. It was cheaper to buy a truck and load it with our stuff. Actually, I put my pickup truck inside the truck, plus all my mom and dad's stuff and drove it from Chicago. Then we put the truck on a consignment lot in Kalispell. The next year I got a call from Pete, the guy who owned the consignment lot, and he said, "These guys are doing a movie over in Browning, and they want to rent your truck. But here's the catch—they want to pay you to drive it. Come on down and meet this guy." I did, and I met Sam Ettelman, or something like that, and I spent most of the summer, the same year that I got married in 1987, driving this truck all around. I was over there until the day I got married, pretty much. They hooked me up with the set decorators, the prop people. Everything was stationed out of Browning for the summer. The name of the movie was War Party. It was definitely a B movie, but it was alright. So, I was hired to move stuff around with that truck. I was there 10 weeks. I learned a lot about Browning. There's a lot of very interesting stuff in that area. I learned about some of the movie stuff and met a lot of neat people.

When I was there, we were up early. We were up at 4:00, and we were there until dark. They paid me well, but they were long hours. It was quite the experience, for sure. I remember moving sets, coming to Kalispell, going to Great Falls. Steve, you remember Johnson at the school district? We needed something, and you said to call your buddy. I think he was the superintendent of the Browning schools. He helped us with a lot of stuff. It was an interesting summer, but not much got done here. Of course, I was working on getting married, too.

Randy Kenyon: Was that the Robin Williams movie?

Ray: No, that was something different. Kevin Dillon was one of the main actors. And Peggy what's-her-name, from the Mod Squad, was in it. I got to meet her. I didn't know who she was. I

was just standing there waiting to pick something up at one of the sets. I was just BS-ing with her. She had a couple of little parts in the movie.

Jim Rittenburg: Ed Neneman says he was an extra in Heaven's Gate. Were you in the movie?

Ray: No, I signed up for it, but never got called. What they did was put a notice in the local paper. Come in. They wanted to see what you looked like. They took your picture. Tom Riemer BS-ed his way into the movie. He signed up and filled out the questionnaire, asking if you could do this or that. I remember him telling me the story. "Can you ride a horse," was one of the questions. If anybody remembers Tom, he was about this tall and this big around. He answered that question, "Like the wind." So, he got called. He was in one of the scenes in the movie. There was the cattlemen's scene where they all sitting around a table conspiring what to do with the sheep people. You can see Tom sitting there. He's in the back, dressed up in a business suit like back in the day. He has a cigar. Some guy says something, and they all go "Unh huh." That was Tom's line. But he told that story many times.

Steve: I think dancing was another qualification.

Ray: Yes, it might have been, because they did the big scenes over in East Glacier.

Steve: If anybody's interested, there's a great book written about the movie Heaven's Gate, called *Final Cut*. I have one, if anyone wants to borrow it.

Ray: It tells all about the making of the movie. Cimino broke Universal and put them in bankruptcy. He did. Because they gave him a blank check. He had done *Deer Hunter* and got the Academy Award a couple of years before. I met him a couple of times. He owns the property where Langton owns today, on Red Meadow up at the top. A quiet guy. He passed away.

Lois: Yes, Jerry Wernick said he saw a woman walking around down there. He asked, "Can I help you?" She said, "I'm Cimino's daughter, and I'm looking for his property." He said, "Well, you're standing on it."

Ray: This was like two years ago, right Peggy? Any other questions? I could BS all day—you know how I am. We have a lot of snacks to get rid of, you guys.

Lois: Thank you, Ray.