Herman Pittman

Interviewed by:	Unidentified	08/23/1989
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Side 1

Interviewer: 90 years? What year did you come to Aitkin County?

Herman: July 15, 1915.

I: Where did you come from? Where did you live before you came here?

H: I lived out Hornick, Iowa (he pronounces it "I-Oh-Way").

I: Hornick, Iowa?

H: Near Sioux City.

I: Near Sioux City. And you moved here as a young lad?

H: Yeah. (unintelligible) came here.

I: Where did you first live when you came to Aitkin County?

H: Half a mile south of Rossburg.

I: And that was in what year?

H: That was 1915.

I: You went to school, then, in the Rossburg area?

H: No. (Unintelligible) come up here (unintelligible). I never went to school in Minnesota.

I: What year did you start working for the state as a forester?

H: I started in September 1921.

I: 1921. But you worked in the woods before that.

H: Yes, more or less all my life?

I: What was your occupation before that?

H: Well, mostly on the farm, workin' in the woods and so forth. And…

The great fire of 1918

I: Just a minute, Herman. You were working for the Soo Line during the 1918 fire. Could you tell us a little bit about that fire, Herman?

H: The afternoon of October 12, 1918, the country was so full of smoke that you couldn't see over half a mile. And about 3:00 that afternoon, the freight come in from the Range over here, and we had engineer and had some flat cars – couple three flat cars – with water barrels on, and I think about six boxcars. They come in. He picked us up. He

said, "They got a fire up towards Lawler." So we took off for that. And we didn't get up there until about 4:30 or quarter to 5:00. And the whole town was burning at that time, except the Depot and the schoolhouse. The schoolhouse was made out of metal.

I: This was the town of Lawler, now.

H: That was Lawler. And the…so… we had about 230 people in that schoolhouse, and the doggone walls was so hot you couldn't put your hands on 'em, so we got those on there (unintelligible) on the train, backed up to East Lake, cut the train off, went back in Lawler, picked up eight more people there, and the Depot burnt while we were there.

And all the other buildings were gone except that old schoolhouse, and that was metal; it wouldn't burn. And we tried to get through to a town by Kettle River, but the bridges were down there; we couldn't get east. And that whole country was on fire. And that was, from there on, that fire went through – clear on through – to Moose Lake, and cleaned up Moose Lake. And actually, I think that fire covered about 235 acres.

I: The bridges were burned out…

H: The railroad bridges burned out across…

I: How did you get from Lawler then over towards Moose Lake, or did you?

H: We couldn't. The road coming down from the highway, which is 210 now, there was a bunch of cars up in that country there; everything was on fire up there. Everyone was trying to get out of the country; they was trying to outrun the fire. And they came down through the Kettle River area there, and there's a bad curve on the Dead Moose River down there? And there was 26 cars went into that gully down there, and there was 26 dead people in the cars.

I: 26 people died on that curve because they run off the road?

H: Couldn't see where they were going.

I: Couldn't see where they were going because of the smoke and the ashes.

I: Yeah. And then from there on, I don't know what happened up there, but we pulled back into Aitkin. That was during the flu season. So we had to find room for at least 230 some people that we brought into Aitkin. And the town of Aitkin was in danger, and almost burnt, too. If it hadn't have been for that new ditch that they dug on the west side of town here, part of Aitkin would have probably burnt.

North of Aitkin here, that bog north of Peterborg's corner? That was all burning. Then up north of us had what you called the band fire. And that started up there, and that burnt across and east; jumped the Willow, and it also jumped the Mississippi River. That burned about 50,000 acres. Then up Cloquet, their fire started right in the wood yard up there; jumped the river into the town, burnt the town, ran through, and I don't know how far east that went. But they still had fired in Duluth, too, you know, around Duluth.

H: This is all from what you call the 1918 fire, now. So, in other words, you are telling me there was more than one spot that was on fire.

I: There was hundreds of fires burning in the country here. The trouble was, there was so many of these fires, they all finally got into being one. But there was hundreds of peat

fires in the country, all over. When that wind came up, it was clocked up there near Duluth at 90 miles an hour! And so they…but that is what it was. Actually, the 1918 fire was just a series of hundreds of them small fires finally all got together in one fire!

I: Tell them about the explosion in the air.

H: Well, we were in Lawler that night there. There was so much gas from the pine and balsam spruce, it sounded like dynamite blowing off up there. You'd see a flash of lightning – it looked like lightning in the clouds, in the (unintelligible) clouds, and it just BOOM just like that, just like thunder, you know!

I: That was gas burning from the smoke, right?

H: Yeah, that was gas.

I: Ok, Herman, you mentioned that there was a flu epidemic at the same time, and you moved 200 and some people into Aitkin. Where did you put all of these people when you moved them into Aitkin?

H: Far as I know, the (unintelligible) were quartered down at the schoolhouse. Say, that was a kind of a hospital there at the time, because of the flu epidemic, too. A lot of people in there, you know, and no hospital, so they moved 'em all into (unintelligible) the school down there, and put cots in there, and took care of 'em.

Hell, they were dyin' off like flies around here, you know.

I: They were fed and bunked right there at the school. And that's the old school that was… How long a time did you actually spend fighting the fire in 1918 – days, months, or a year or whatever it might be?

H: We didn't fight the fire very long after that. It was a week or so after the big fire went through there, and we practically done with it there; it was under control. That was as far as it ever went. But we were out here and there, like on the west of town there, we had peat fires under the railroad grade over there. We finally went down and dug them all out. Had to burn out those big pockets there west of the town there. Those water holes there.

I: Did snow or rain come to fall then, or…

H: Well, I don't remember when we got rain, but we must have got rain later on in October, because we didn't have any more fires after that big fire. 'Cause there wasn't anything left to burn! (Laughs)

I: In other words, you're telling me that the fire actually – other than the peat fires - it burned itself out.

H: Yeah. After the wind went down, well, the fire slowed down, and the natives down in there managed to take care of them down south of Lawler there. That fire didn't go too far south, about five miles south of Lawler, and that was about as far as it ever went. But the ones over east went through Moose Lake and down in there. That went almost down to Sturgeon Lake. Just a…Moose Horn River down there, and several places. That fire even jumped Moose Lake when the fire burned in Moose Lake. The shingles and stuff across the lake started a lot of spot fires there.

I: This, by far then, in your experience fire-fighting and working with the forestry and all of this, was probably the worst fire that you've ever seen, then?

H: I saw a lot of 'em years later, but nothing like that!

I: In 1918, during this fire, you were actually working for the railroad.

H: Yeah.

The job of a forester

I: Then, in 1921, you say, you started with the forestry?

H: I started with the forestry. I started with the forestry up here (unintelligible). Worked on the fire up there.

I: Tell us a little bit about your working days after you started with the forestry, and on through your, the history that you have. Just give us a running account.

H: I started out with Kramer (unintelligible) and our first jobs were fire prevention, fire fighting, and seeing that the lumber companies cleaned up their slash. That was our main duties. And there was also an educational program went along with it. We taught the schools, and different meetings and stuff like that, fire prevention. But as we went along, they kept addin' this and that and the other to us, so finally we had the whole works in our lap! We had all the timber sales, scaling, and took care of all the state land. We had that throwed in our laps.

I: Catch the guys that were stealing timber?

H: Huh?

I: Catch the guys that were stealing timber?

H: Oh, yes. In the old days then you had to (unintelligible) as usual, and had a lot of (unintelligible) thievers and stuff like that. Especially during the hard years of the '30s when you couldn't get a job for love nor money! Everybody's getting'… cut a couple of cords of wood and (unintelligible) a little sugar and salt and so forth, flour and such…all the income they had.

I: That what they used to call the long (unintelligible).

H: That's right.

A typical week

I: You told us, or I've heard you tell stories about when you'd go out in the morning and probably have to stay out in the woods overnight and never get in for maybe a day or two. Tell us some of them…

H: I used to, I used to leave home here at 8:00 on a Monday morning, and I mighta got back home Saturday afternoon.

I: This was most of the time you were on foot.

H: I was on foot all the time. We averaged 25 miles a day or more, and if night come, and I could make it, I'd find some pothole lake someplace, always carried fish line

around in my hat, you know! (Laughs) So I'd get myself a couple of sunfish and a crappie for dinner, and cut a few balsams and make me a bed, and then I'd camp for the evening, you know. I enjoyed it.

I: That's a little different than if you were going to go camping today. You'd have to have a lot more equipment than what you had.

H: You'd probably couldn't get by with just as much now as I could then. Now days you gotta have your sleeping bags, you gotta have this, and you gotta have that. But in those days, cripes, all you had was what you could pack on your back. That's all you carried.

I: When you were out for these days, from like you say, from Monday to Saturday, what actually were you doing out in the woods?

H: Well, I was just covering the territory; seeing how everything was going along. Visit with the natives. (unintelligible) fire prevention program. And I'd start here and I'd go up maybe through Blind Lake area and wind up (unintelligible) up to where Cecil Greengardner (?) used to live, then I'd take that road into Bain (?) or else I'd go out through, go over through and go into Swatara for the night. The next day I'd cut east of Swatara, make a big circle in the east, and wind up in Palisade. The next night, I'd either be in Tamarack or Lawler.

I: Did you go…take these trips in the wintertime, too, as well as summertime?

H: No.

I: …just summertime.

H: Mostly all summer. In the winter time when we had timber - later on in years we were handling the timber and stuff – well, we used to make the lumber camps and stuff like that, you know. Traveled on snowshoes and one camped and the other check out, or see…do the scaling for 'em.

I: What did you do with the mosquitoes and deerflies and horseflies when you were out in the woods all summer?

H: You would just live with 'em, that was all! (Laughs) About the only cure that I could ever find and the best cures I ever find, get the smokiest doggone piece of bacon rind you can get, and run that on your neck and hands and arms and by God, they wouldn't bother you! Deerflies, of course, they weren't bothered about it, but the mosquitoes and black flies wouldn't touch it.

I: You should probably had that patented, so you could get to sell al lot of that today!

A lot of walking

H: Yeah, well. That's… otherwise it was a healthy life.

I: Apparently it was a healthy life – you're still here!

H: (Laughs)

I: Did you ever get tired of walking as much as you did?

H: It never bothered me.

I: It never bothered you!

H: It never bothered me. Christ, I could…my average hiking time when I was all by myself, was about 5 miles an hour.

I: That's just what I was going to ask you. About 5 miles an hour!

H: Nobody liked to work with me, they said they couldn't keep up. I had learned a stride for a person my size when anybody that walked. A full 36 inches every step I took. Of course, I stepped the same number of steps anybody else was behind me, but they were taking about a 30-inch step, so they were fallin' back all the time, you know. (Laughs) Trouble was everybody said they couldn't work with me, didn't want to work with me, because they couldn't keep up!

Staying healthy

I: During this 1918 fire, when you brought all these people back into Aitkin, did you ever get the flu?

H: No.

I: You never got the flu.

H: Never got the flu, but what the heck was it – got at the start of Word War II, but that only lasted a day or two. I broke that right away, it was (unintelligible) because I had a high fever and all that.

Someone else in the room: You could walk so fast, you probably walked away from the flu!

H: (Laughs) Well, during the flu time, we had that, we lived in Rossburg at that time. It was the (unintelligible) was on, and I had another young lad up there – we practically took care of the whole darn neighborhood up there. We milked their cows and hauled water in, and (unintelligible) and got grub for 'em and hauled it back out to the farm. Trading with 'em all the time (unintelligible). We were just…

I: Do you…Herman, do you contribute your good health and long life to eating a certain kind of food, or certain foods, or…?

H: Oh, heck. As far as my appetite was, I could eat anything that was eatable, as far as that goes! (Laughs) There it was, what I ate or anything else. Of course, we didn't have all these fancy prepared foods in those days that they have now, because, cripes, you could get… you'd go to restaurants or hotels or somethin' like that, up there in Swatara and Palisade. Heck, they'd just serve it out like you're servin' at home. Put it on the table and you helps yourself.

I: When you were out hiking and going through walking…doing all this walking, you must have carried some food and water along with you, didn't you?

H: I never carried any water with me, because you always could find that. But…

I: In other words, you drank from whatever you could find.

H: Well, if I was in a cedar swamp, I'd kick a hole in moss, lay a handkerchief down in there, and drink that water, and that was just as doggone good as any spring water you ever saw!

I: Do you think the Department of Health would go along with that today?

H: (Laughs) They wouldn't today, no! (Laughs hard) Probably wouldn't. I've stomped a hole in the swamp a lotta times.

I: You'd just drink the water that was available.

H: Yeah.

I: Did you ever shoot a deer or anything along the route like that? Did you carry a gun?

H: I carried a pistol. For, that is, some of the trips I used to make I always carried a pistol with me. In certain times, it come in kinda handy. Some of those bushwhackers were a little bit salty, so you didn't know what you were runnin' up against (laughs) before you got there.

Using his gun against trespassers

I: Can you give us just one experience you had out in the woods like that, that might be interesting?

H: Well. We had a, down in the Finn country one time, there was a man going to carve me up with a double-bitted axe, but he didn't! (Laughs) I shot the handle off his axe! (Hard laughter)

I: Why was he mad at you?

H: Well, he wasn't mad at me. The understanding was that they, they chased all the rangers outta there a couple days before that, you know. Well, heck, I didn't know anything about the deal. They called me in from the head office, and wanted to know if I'd go over there and check that trespass out.

I said, "Well," I said. "What's the matter with the guy (unintelligible)?"

"Well," he said, "He's got another job someplace and can't get down there."

Well, he was the one they chased out! And he didn't want to go back down in there with 'em. So I did. And heck, I went down there. Nobody around the home. I picked up their trail down in the (unintelligible)… these three big overgrown sons over 6 foot and better, cuttin' pulpwood.

I said, "What are you doin' in here?" I says. "This is state land, you ain't got any business in here."

The youngest one of the crowd – the others never said a word – this young pup, he was kinda cocky, had a double-bitted axe, and said "Yeah" he said. "You know" he said, "One of you guys rangers was out here the other day," he says. "We run him out on the (unintelligible)."

And I says, "What's gonna happen if I don't run?" And he started walkin' towards me, got the axe up like that. He said, "If you don't go," he said, "we'll leave you here."

And I said, "Yeah, (unintelligible) be somebody else," I said.

And he took about two more steps and I said, "You've gone just far enough!" And I flipped that old super 38 out from under my shoulder holster; I dropped that down and he pulled his hand back, and I shot the handle off just about that far above his fingers! (Laughs hard) Well, that changed the situation right there! He turns just about as white as the snow was!

And I said, "Now," I said. "The next one outta this thing is gonna be right square between your eyes!" And I said, "This is the end of this monkey business!" And I told him, I said, "Now pile that damn wood up, and I'll measure it." I says, "You can pay me the trespass money (?)." And so it was (unintelligible), after they got everything wrapped up, the old man staggered out of there, and he…I talked with him awhile. Kids went in his house, and I poked him ahead of me goin' to the house. So I figgered one of the darn (unintelligible) my 30-30 and might take a potshot at me comin' in! We got in there, and they was sittin' around the table drinkin' coffee. So I figgered out his bill and everything, told him what it was, and he talked Finn to the old lady. She went in the bedroom and come out with the money. (unintelligible) gave them a receipt for it, and I said, "Now," I said, "Mister, instead of you goin' out there and cutting wood, why don't you buy it?"

He looked at me kinda funny and says, "You mean to say I can buy that?"

And I said, "How much do you want?"

"Well," he said, "I'd like to have 40 cords."

And I said, "All right." I says, "We'll just make you out a bill of sale for 40 cords, you can pay me this Sunday for it, and," I said, "I'll send it in." And I said, "Don't you cut another stick of wood until that permit comes back to you." And I said, "When you get done," I said, "You pile it up," and I said, "You call old Mosley (?) and you tell him you want a scale!"

"Ok"

So it was only about 10 days, 2 weeks – the phone rang. It was the boss Mosley. He said, "What are you doin'?" I said, "Not much of anything." I said, "Little".

"Slash to take care of (unintelligible)," he says, "Can you go over to East Lake country there, Lawler country," he said, "And scale that (unintelligible)?"

I said, "Hell, what's the matter with what's his name at Sandy Lake?"

"Well," he said. "This Finn called and never mentioned his name. But he said he wanted a scale. Well, I said I'd send for the guy down from Moose Lake. 'Oh, I don't want him down here at all! You send that nice ranger from Aitkin!' " (Lots of laughter)

I about thought I'd crack! That settled that right there! He said "that nice ranger from Aitkin!" (Laughs) (unintelligible)

I got more friends in that Finn country than any other ranger ever had. And I think I picked up more people for trespass down there than any other ranger.

I: Do you have any enemies in the county?

H: Huh?

I: Do you have any enemies?

H: I don't know. I don't believe I do. But you know, the funny thing about it, I could get along with the Finns. The other people couldn't…we didn't have one ranger in the district that can get along with the Finn country.

I: Is that right.

H: And I could get over there and get along with 'em and talk with 'em and visit with 'em, and sold timber to 'em and this and that, and one thing and… never had a bite of trouble with 'em. If they had troubles, God, they'd come into the office and want to know somethin' about it. I admire the Finn people. (unintelligible) One thing about 'em, no fires. Never had any fires in Finn country.

I: Was that right?

H: Yeah. They don't believe in burning. That's something (unintelligible) up there. That's money in the pocket. That's the way they look at it.

Herman's family

I: How many years did you have in with the Forestry, Herman, altogether, before you retired?

H: Forty-one years and six months.

I: Forty-one years and six months. During those forty-one years and six months, you raised a family here in Aitkin.

H: Yeah, I raised my family here in Aitkin. (unintelligible) through high school here.

I: Can you tell me their names and they came, and you know, and about when they were born, and all of that?

H: Well, let's see…

I: Just close. You don't have to be right to the day.

H: Helen was born in 1924. (unintelligible) years old. Hazel is…she's 59. Alice is 56, and Jojo (?) is 51.

I: You had four girls then altogether?

H: Yes.

I: And they all went to school here in Aitkin.

H: To Aitkin High School.

I: And you've lived in this house most of the time you were…

H: I've lived in this house for over…pert near 67 years.

I: 67 years! Pretty good length of time.

H: (Laughs)

I: What, other than your working in the forestry, what did you do in your time off? Fish, hunt, or what?

H: Well, I done a lot of fishin' and a lot of hunting as the seasons roll around. And after I retired, I went to California out there, and I used to do a lot of fishing out there on the Pacific.

I: That was a little different style of fishin'.

H: Different style of fishing! (Laughs)

Hunting and fishing in the early days

I: Can you compare the days of fishing and hunting in the early days to what they are now?

H: Well, as far as the duck situation is concerned, that's nil, just nothing.

I: Yeah.

H: When I first started huntin' ducks you could go out here any morning early – we'd leave here early and get out and get (unintelligible) – half an hour we'd have our limit, and maybe an hour, we'd have a limit of ducks of twelve birds. Yeah, but now, I've seen the lakes out here, like Sisebagama, Hanson Lake when the bluebill flight was on, there'd be acres and acres of birds sittin' out on the middle of the lake. There's a lot of potholes around here. Course they'd raise up there, and there'd just be a cloud, you know. It…back in 1919 to about 1927, '28, that's when our big flights were on.

I: Um hm.

H: There were lots of mallards.

I: What do you feel was the downfall of the duck population, what caused them to…

H: Well, I suppose one of the bad features of it was the droughts. Knocked 'em for a loop in the early '30s. Our duck population went down in the '30s. And in 1931 to about '36, that's where our duck population run down. Boy, they just tumbled.

The droughts of the 1930s

I: You're talkin' about the drought now. What years did they include?

H: '31 to '36.

I: '31 and '36 – to '36. Can you…

H: To '36.

I: Right. Can you tell us a little bit about your fire fighting and stuff during those days when it was so dry?

H: Well, we had hundreds of peat fires, 1932 and '34. Well, '32 I had probably 125 or 30 kids around here workin'. In 1934 I had 384. And March 1 in 1932, we had 4600 peat fires in Aitkin County.

I: Did they burn all winter?

H: Well, they burned in spring, you know. We had a dry spring. And all the sudden they burned all the meadows, you know. And of course, everything was dry. And the

peat got… on March the 8th we got about 10 or more of the wettest doggone snow you ever saw! And you could hardly drive a car through it. It took about 55% of our fires.

I: All these statistics that you're telling me, how do you keep them in your head for so many years?

H: (Laughs) I don't know!

I: I can't sometimes remember what day it is! And you seem to quote days, times, and just…

H: It seems it's just natural they're there. And they stay, I guess! (Laughs) What happened yesterday or the day before, that's blank! Not as anything that happened years ago, there's that pretty well.

The Depression

I: Can you…do you recall any hardships you had during the Depression or the drought, you know, as a family man, or as a forest ranger? Tell us a little bit of what life was like.

H: It was about normal for us. Of course, things you had to pinch on everything was, you know. Certain things were hard to get, like sugar and coffee, and lard and stuff like that. My wife, she made doughnuts for the shack down here, you know, at that time. They gave her a handout for sugar and lard and flour and stuff like that. To keep her business goin'. But otherwise, we didn't have any trouble as far as that goes. We had, in those days, we always used to have a big garden out here, you know, on this vacant lot just north here.

Someone else in the room: Ask him about cranberries and blueberries. How'd you find those.

I: When you were looking around the woods, the cranberries and blueberries were quite plentiful in them days?

H: Not really. There was times there when we had good crops, and other times there were just…there wasn't any. I remember one time up north of Blind Lake, there was a little mouse bog in there, about three acres, I went through there one time along about this time of year. Little earlier than this. I walked across there and the ground was just covered with cranberries! And the nice red big ones, you know. And then there's a lake up north of there, there's cranberries around that. (unintelligible) And I thought to myself, Boy! I'll wait until about the 5th or 6th of September, and take a pail and come up here and get me a couple pails of cranberries. Well, along about 10 days or so, I went up there again, and I took a pail with me. I'll bet you there wasn't a quart of cranberries left in the whole cockeyed thing! And I went lookin' around there, and all I could see was deer tracks punched in the moss, and bear tracks! (Laughs) They just cleaned that whole thing! (Laughs) There wasn't enough cranberries there to even make a dish of sauce. I don't know – they cleaned everything out of there.

I: On the food articles, can you remember the prices of things compared to what they are today? Like a pound of hamburger, or a pound of sugar, or a loaf of bread?

H: Well, two pounds of hamburger for a quarter. You could buy a ring of baloney for a dime. And you could buy steak for about twenty cents, twenty-five cents a pound. Good

steak. And now, it's two and a half, three dollars a pound, of course! But…sugar was quite reasonable, about five cents. And coffee was probably, well, depending on what kind you got, it was anywhere from twenty cents a pound to forty-five cents a pound, depending on what kind of coffee you bought. So the higher class of coffee was around forty-five cents a pound. But, otherwise…

Forester wages

I: Things were a little bit… What kind of wages were you getting an hour then back in those days?

H: I started out workin' for sixty dollars a month.

I: Sixty dollars a month, and walkin' twenty-five days, er, miles a day!

H: Then the next year I got seventy, and the next year it was seventy-five, and the next year eighty, and so on up until I hit a hundered and ten, and that was tops. Up to around 1936 or 7. Then, I happened to be in the hardware down here, what's his name used to have the hardware here? Used to be a representative? I know he's died here a few years… Huh?

I: Hagman?

H: Yeah. I can remember one day, he's was back of the desk and he hollered at me, and he said, "I want to talk to you."

So I went back and talked to him. And he said, "How do you make a livin'?"

And I says, "We don't!" but I says, "We get by!"

"Well," he said. "I been checkin' up," he said, "on you guys' salaries down there." He says, "I think we're gonna do something about that this fall."

Well he got a jump for me from $110 to $137.50, by God, the next July 1! So from there on up, well, they kept going. Now those same guys are getting $12,000 a year.

I: Or better.

H: Hell, those other tops is over clear over clear across the top of the line, getting around $50,000 a year!

You said something about the river. As far as I know, the last boat there in that river was in June in 1916, during the flood.

Logging around Aitkin

I: How about these log rafts that they come down the river like the Waldick, Palisade, and…

H: Well, they used to have a big landing down here at the mouth of Mud River. The railroad track went down there, you know. And they'd go in there and they'd put in chains down there, and they'd pull that stuff up and load it right on the cars, right there. It was logs, and ties…

I: How far north did these logs come from? Up the river?

H: Shovel Lake.

I: Shovel Lake.

H: Shovel Lake. Yup, way up on the big road. They all came down the big road.

I: And then into the Mississippi.

H: The Mississippi. There was a lot of stuff come down the Mississippi, too. But I don't know just where that came from, probably as far up as Jamison, I don't know.

I: At the mill there, did they have a mill right there at the landing?

H: No. Everything was shipped out by train.

I: The logs were loaded on a train and shipped out?

H: …on cars. The only mill they had here was (unintelligible) Brothers down here right where the Deerwood Lumber Company yard is now.

I: What did they…

H: (unintelligible)s had a mill there.

I: What did they saw out there? What did they make?

H: Well, you mean the (unintelligible)?

I: Yeah.

H: They were sawin' deadheads. Diggin', pullin' deadheads out of the river there. They went all the way up to Palisade. Even above Palisade. They had two big pontoon there about sixty feet long and they'd go up there and pull those deadheads up.

I: Wasn't there a barrel stave factory here?

H: That was out where Earl Fairchild lived.

I: Ok.

H: There was barrel inners and barrel staves. That was Osterhaus Mill.

I: And a heading mill…

H: Heading, huh?

I: What did the heading mill…

H: The heading… and they had the big heading mill there, you know. They sold barrelheads there, you know. They sold…(unintelligible) they got a lot of stuff sawed…

I: But the lumber come out… the timber come out of the river, come down…

H: Most of it… a lot of that came outta the river. A lot of it was hauled in from local here. They used to have what they call a stave setup here. They used to make barrel staves outta the black ash. There was several different parties around here you could get those black ash logs and split 'em, and split the barrel staves out of 'em.

I: That was really the biggest industry around here in those days. The logging…

H: In those days. Logging, yeah. Logging was the big thing. Well, dairy was big, too, at that time.

I: You know, I've seen pictures in my time of them hauling humongous loads of logs on a sled on ice with a team of horses pulling it. Tell us a little bit about that, and the size of them loads and stuff…

H: I loaded in the woods up there and… at one time, and I think probably the biggest load of logs I ever sent down on ice was 15,000. Normally about 8-9,000.on four horses.

I: Board feet.

H: Huh?

I: Board feet.

H: Yeah. They had… the sleighs were set at 8 foot 6 run, and the bunks on there were sixteen foot. And some of 'em were called stick sleighs; they had what you call stick sleighs. And then the others on chains were called quarter bines, you've heard of them. You could load a stick sleigh up pretty doggone fast, you know, because you'd put 'em up with cabins. You had to balance that load just perfect. You could stand on top there and you could wrap the whole load. If you got a wrong one side, you were done; they couldn't get (unintelligible) rucks in the snow, you know, take in the woods, the bines, you know.

I: How did you load those loads?

H: They were loaded with a jammer.

I: Run by horsepower?

H: Horsepower. Just a cable with hooks on there, and big thirty-five foot leads comin' up there, you know, away like that, and toss up there, and the cable and down on the load, and hook a team on it, pulled it back. And it had… there's two hookers, one on each side of the chain, and small stuff, they just wrapped (unintelligible) 6 foot, and the bunks would pull 'em up there. But when they'd get a big one, why they – that was something!

I: And this… there was no power saws or anything in those days.

H: Not in those days, it was all crosscut. (Laughs)

I: One-man or two-man?

H: Two-man crosscuts on logs, and pulpwood was a one-man,. Then they finally came out with a Swede saw. They had the one-man saws to start with, and when the Swede saw finally came out – that was the top of the line! Oh, they could cut good pulpwood with that thing.

Life in a logging camp

I: Did you ever spend any time in those loggin camps, or…

H: Well, I spent a lot of time in logging camps!

I: What was life like in the logging camps?

H: Great!!! (Enthusiastic)

I: Describe it a little bit.

H: You take, now you take… you probably have heard what poor food and poor conditions. Well, of course, the bunkrooms were… there wasn't anything fancy about 'em. You either had hay in your bunk, or cedar boughs, or something. Then you had your blankets; you didn't have any mattresses. But then… like, your kitchens? Cripes almighty! They had everything and anything you wanted to eat! I worked one camp for… I don't think I ever set down to a meal what there wasn't at least five different kinds of meat on the table! Potatoes, and peas, corn, and all kinds of desserts.

Someone else in the room: The reason they had that good food here - before that, the lumber camp that didn't feed good, didn't have no men!

H: They didn't have any men. That was right! If they didn't feed good, the men didn't stay! As a general rule, you'd get a good camp, the same guys would come back every year.

I: Each camp had their own cook, or did everyone take a turn cooking?

H: Oh, no! They'd hire their cooks. We used to get these hotel and restaurant cooks out of Duluth in the winter, when business was poor up there. They'd drift into the woods and cook in the camps! We had some wonderful cooks.

I: Good pay.

H: Yeah. And the general rule in the big camps - the last camp I was in, it was a 200-man camp – they had a cook that did nothing but cook meat. Another cooked vegetables. The next guy down all the baking; pies and bread, stuff like that.

Someone else in the room: (unintelligible) and a cook's helper.

H: And then they had the cookies (?), o course, the cook's helpers. Then the cookies that always waited table. About five or six of those in there at mealtime, you know. Heck, you could go in any time you wanted to. We used to haul the logs outta the woods, and be waitin' for return sleighs, or somethin' like that, we just hiked into camp, grabbed a cup of coffee, or a doughnut, or anything we wanted. Just grab it, go back out and get another load! (Laughs)

Someone else in the room: Also, during the mealtime, nobody had any conversation or anything like that. They just went in and ate and went out again.

H: The only voice you'd hear in the mealtime in there, was somebody "Please pass the potatoes." Or "Will you please pass the meat down here." That's the only words you would ever hear at mealtime. (Unintelligible) stand back there and look (unintelligible) at the table (laughs) he'd come ridin' herd on you! You did no talking at meals!

I: What was the reason for that?

H: Well, if you sit there and talk, it could take an hour or more for 'em to eat. They paid… they'd feed those 200 guys there in less than 40 minutes.

I: In other words, they didn't want to waste any time feeding you; they wanted you out in the woods working.

H: They wanted us back out there. Well, of course, you killed time coming in to eat, and you killed time getting' back out to the job you were on. Normally it took us an hour and a half, an hour and three quarters by the time we hiked into camp, and got our dinners and went back out to the job again.

I: How long a day did you generally put in? From when to when?

H: Oh, that'd been about…the teamsters used to up about 5:00 in the morning, and take care of the horses. And they were on the, on the road by 6:30 or a quarter to 7:00. And we were in the woods before 7:00. We'd leave… figure to leave the camp by 7:00 and get back in the woods. It all depends on how much of a job we had ahead of us. But you had… if we had to, a lot of times, we'd have to load sleighs maybe 6:00, 6:30, sometimes like that, but not any later than that.

I: Did you get paid by the piece, or by the hour, or by the week, or?

H: By the month.

I: What kind of wages did you get?

H: Around anywhere from $30 a month to $45.

I: Plus your room and board.

H: Yeah. Then on top of that, I worked up there, I started work with this one big camp, started in at $30 a month. And went out there alone, and one of the guys was top-loading the sleighs, got his ankle crushed, and the boss came around and said, "Anybody around here know anything about top-loading?"

Nobody said anything, and I said, "Well," I said, "I've loaded a few loads, but," I said, "I'm not no expert at it."

Well he said, "Finish that load there, and see what you can do with it."

And I (unintelligible). And he said, "Well," he said, "You better stay where you're at!" (Laughs) He said, "It looks alright to me!"

I: What did they do about the guy with the crushed ankle? What become of him?

H: He came out and down to the hospital.

I: The hospital where?

H: God, I don't know where they took him to.

I: There was no hospital in Aitkin then.

H: No, we weren't anywhere near Aitkin. I was clear up in the border country.

I: Oh. Oh.

H: They might have taken him into Duluth for all I know. But then, he came back a couple days later, and I was loadin', and he said, "What are they payin' ya?"

I said, "Thirty bucks a month."

"Oh, from now on you're going to earn forty-five."

(Laughs) So that helped! He was scrappy old cuss. Haywire (?) O'Connell. Deer River.

I: Were you even on any of the boats on the river that came down?

H: No.

I: You never had anything to do with the boats?

H: No. That was before my time, when they had the boats on the river.

I: That was before your time?

H: Yeah.

(Pause in tape)

What they should do with this 1918 stuff is type it up and run it at about the first part of October.

I: Yeah.

H: The history of the 1918 fire.

I: You, in your later years here at Aitkin, you were a member of the Aitkin Fire Department.

H: Oh, yes.

I: You were one of the founders almost, were you not?

H: (Laughs) Just about! But I wasn't a member until 1944. I worked with 'em the day they got the 1924 truck. (Unintelligible)

Someone else in the room: Do you remember when the hotel burnt down here? Were you around here then? I don't know what year that would have been, and they had the pump right in the river, and the guys were standing in the river pumping water,

I: Which hotel was that?

Someone: I think it was the Foley Hotel right down by Ripple River, I think.

H: Well, that was before my time here. (Unintelligible) they had the old hand pumps. At that time, in the early days, you know, right in the middle of Main Street down here where the two highways cross, that was where one big well was. Right in the middle of the street there.

I: That part of the street still sinks.

H: That's right, it still sinks there. That was their water supply.

I: Is there anything more that you'd like to add to your history?

H: I don't know, offhand (thinking about it).

I: You're leaving for California soon, now?

H: I'll be in California the 6th of September. I'm going to Dallas for the (unintelligible) for a week or so, and then I'll take off from there.

I: You figgerin' to come back here in the summer times again?

H: I don't know what's gonna happen. I don't look forward to the next year ahead, that's all. What's gonna happen or anything…

I: One day at a time.

H: Yeah, just… One of the most comical things I ever had happen was up here towards Blind Lake, in the Blind Lake ditches there? I come down to Blind Lake, there was a swamp there, and the beaver pond in the ditch there, and I couldn't get across. So I had to follow around to a couple little (unintelligible) and the water was about, oh, probably about that wide. I jumped across it. Damn bank was all washed out, it was just about straight up and down, just about as high and me on my hands and knees, crawlin' up over the top of that bank, just as I stuck my head over the top of the bank, here come a god-dang three quarter grown black bear! He come up on the bank at the same time! (Laughs) If he'd just stuck his foot out we coulda shook hands! (Laughs)

(end of side 1)

Side 2

Herman: Third of October, we had a lightning storm here, in Aitkin. Sixty-two strikes in thirty-two minutes. And one of them hit the (unintelligible) up here, and the damn wind was blowin' like a hurricane there. (unintelligible) that fire was pert near (unintelligible). Burned 4200 acres in two, about three hours. The dry, dead grass. We tied that up by noon the next day.

Interviewer: Thirty…was that '38?

H: Huh? '38. And we had one fire southeast of town, or southwest of town here, burned about 5 acres, and two up in Blind Lake area there, and one in Aitkin Township over there practically right across from Chuck Schoepf's, that burned about 7, 7 to 9 acres. And then they had the one up on 27 up there – that burned about 5 acres. We got those corralled. But this one up here (unintelligible) nobody could get ahead of it.

I: When did they start using the towers?

H: Well, I think I built the first tower up at Swatara out of some big cedar poles in 19…

I: Was that White Elk?

H: No, Elk was south…you know where the old gravel pit used to be south of Swatara?

I: Basically, yeah.

H: On top of that big hill?

I: Yeah.

H: That's where we built that tower. Out of cedar poles there. And that was 1928 or 29, I think.

I: Did you man the tower yourself?

H: No. No, we had to hire somebody to man the towers. Then we built…

I: What did you have for communications from the towers?

H: Telephones.

I: Just telephones.

H: Yeah. And we built…the first tower we built here, we built right here south side of town. And then we tore that one down, and set that up north, a hundred-foot tower, and took that out to Glen. We built… (unintelligible) built that up there. They were going to build the footings for it, and we built the tower. And then we built the Sandy Lake tower; that was the first tower we built there, it was a wooden tower. And that was in '25 or 26 when we built that. And we built a cabin up there when we built the tower. Then we built a warehouse later on up there. And then a few years later then they sent us up a steel tower, a hundred foot steel tower, so we built that up there at Sandy Lake. And then later on, when we built the one here in Aitkin, that moved from Aitkin to Hill City and built that tower in Hill City. And that was in the 1920s.

I: The tower system worked out real successful.

H: Worked real good, except when you'd get foggy weather, or some… or get the goddang country full of smoke. Lot of times, you know how it is here in the fall, it gets hazy, you can't see, you know? You gotta guess at something. If a fire balls up, the black smoke comes up, you know got a fire, but otherwise, they lay there smoking and smoldering, just like in the '36? They had the big fire north of Hogland. Up there on the border?

I: Yeah.

H: It was eighty-four miles around the fire line. And that burned in there for weeks. And nobody knew it was in there, because they had so many dang many flare fires on the Canadian side, the smoke was getting' down there, towers or nothin' was no good to 'em – they couldn't see anything!

I: Yeah.

H: But they did find, if somebody hadn't a go up that old trail up there, then by God, here was the thing a burning (unintelligible). And we had, the same time, we had that 12,000-acre fire down here by Arthite (?). And Grover Conset (?) was a big shot with the forest service at that time. And he was up there, and we had that under control, he said, "You better go home," he said, "and pack a bag," he said. " You can go up to Hogland and go on to that fire up there." And I said, "Well," I said, "Ok." I didn't get home until the next day (unintelligible). (Laughs)

I: Those towers are still in use today, are they not?

H: Oh, yes. They're using them.

I: They have a little more sophisticated equipment in 'em now?

H: Radios, now days. Everything is radio.

I: Otherwise the spotting is still the same.

H: Well, you still use your cross shots. Triangulation, they call it. Yeah. You can spot a fire awful doggone close, I'll tell you.

I: Right close to the 40.

H: I used to have, uh, Kellerman there, old Bill Christianson, Ewell Wold (?) –you remember him? Take his six-pack of beer up there and his lunch, and he'd sit there. He was sittin' there in the afternoon, and the phone ring, "Say, you gotta a fire over here" at such-and-such a place. And he says, "I think it's in section" so-and-so. Jesus, I (laughs) (unintelligible) where the fire was! (Laughs) He hadn't even crossed the (unintelligible)! He knew the country just like the back of his hands, you know. Traveled over so much of it, peddling that doggone coffee and stuff that he used to peddle.

I: When you went to…responded to a fire back in those days, what did you have for equipment?

H: Just my pickup, a few pump tanks and cells…

I: It wasn't a four-wheel drive pickup either, was it?

H: Heck, no! You didn't have any four-wheel drives! (Laughs) You had to scratch, scramble even to get a good pickup. For a few years, we didn't have any. Shucks, we used my car, you know…after years. All we had to fight fires was those damn pump tanks.

I: Yeah. Did you ever find one that fit your back?

H: Well, not really! But those Lear (?) ones that we got there, with the ventilation bar on them, you know, they worked out pretty good. You didn't get wet. The others, Christ, you'd be soakin' wet. Every time you'd bend over, you'd fell water on the back of your neck. (Laughs)

I: They…the state, during the fire season, would put out extra men like they do now?

H: Not necessarily. Maybe one or two, and that would be the sum total. But now you can put on half a dozen or a dozen if you wanted. The last few years I worked there, I had maybe six or eight guys. I'd run three crews out of the office down here. (Unintelligible) fires, and I could keep 'em busy.

I: What do you think about these bombers fighting fire, and helicopters?

H: I think they're a damn big expense!

I: For what they're getting out of them.

H: For what they're get… the thing of it is, (unintelligible) they don't have enough of 'em. If they had enough of 'em so that this one come in, one right behind him, and keep right on doin' it, it'd do something. But he comes in, he drops his load, he's gotta go for, heck, three-quarters of an hour (unintelligible). By the time he gets back, your fire's runnin' for another quarter of a mile, you know. So you're not gaining too much. You get a hand crew…I used to tell 'em, I'd take one of those old fire-fighting crews of mine and I'd put out a fire quicker than they could think of!

I was so proud of that bunch I had. Those kids – you can say they were kids, 18 to 21 years old – they could put out more doggone fire in a day than these guys with their equipment!

I: Yeah. That's probably true, all right.

H: Then we finally got plows and bulldozers, and that was a big help. That give us something to back up on. But I've seen the time there, when I…(unintelligible) fire… had to back up from a half to a mile in order to put in, burn in a fire break, a back fire. Back fire, firebreak in there. Now you don't dare set a fire break, you set one up, and… it's just like here a couple years ago, they had one up in the bog up here, and Bill Coop (?) backfired the damn thing across there and put the fire out, and Jesus, they were going to arrest him for setting the back fire! But he put the dang fire out.

I: That's right.

H: No, I tell you, you get a big fire, I tell you, you gotta go to a backfire. I don't care what anybody says!

I: They don't always agree with that, though. Now like on these big fires out west, and Yellowstone Park and that, they say that the park is going to come back better now than it ever was before, or…

H: Oh, it'll come back. As far as being burned, it might be less dead timber and stuff laying on the ground. But the thing of it is, it's gonna be 50, 60 years before it's back.

I: Do you believe in the theory of lettin' Mother Nature take its course?

H: Not the way they do it.

I: No.

H: I maintain if they can get a fire back in there, put the darn thing out, and then let nature reseed the burn. Can always take that, got over a million acres there that's burnt. That's gonna take anywhere from 45 to 60 years before that will be back in circulation again. Same way in all that… it's just like, they got a fire down there where Helen lives, or right down there (unintelligible), and it's over east side of the mountain from her, and it's on a dry brush area there that hasn't had a fire for a hundred years! Comin' up the side of the mountain there.

I: That's one theory, they say if the had more fires burn up more fires, like (unintelligible) after quite awhile, you come out in the spring and we'd burn it off. Periodically we'd burn it off. You don't have so much dead stuff…

H: I still maintain that they're not doing the right thing. They should burn these cockeyed meadows every spring just to see the smoke gets out of the grass, and then we'd have our sharp-tailed grouse back, and we'd have probably, eventually, maybe prairie chickens would come back into this country. We used to have lots of prairie chickens up here north of town, out here in Spencer bog. Now we got a couple small flocks out here in the Spencer bog, and we got a couple up north of town, maybe 30, 40 birds in a bunch, that's all.

I: Sharp-tails?

H: Yeah. We used to have them up there by the hundreds! I've seen a time up there in the winter time in that (unintelligible) brush up there – there was birch they cut – they'd be five, six hundred of those birds in there in a bunch!

I: Yeah. We used to see huge flocks during the winter, we'd see huge flocks.

H: But I still maintain if they'd burn those doggone meadows and give 'em a nest place – they don't nest in that doggone dead grass.

I: No. It seems that's true.

H: If you go up there right now, (unintelligible) nesting season this last spring, if you found any nests at all, you found right in the edge of the swamp up there, right in the blueberry…edge of the blueberry bog, going south of the spruce swamp there. If there was any nests in there, they was out in the grass, there wasn't a nest.

I: Well, Herman, thank you for your information and the history of the country here, and I wish you a lot of luck in your trip out West, and I hope you enjoy your stay out there in sunny California.

H: I'll be back to work when I get out there!

I: What do you do out there to keep busy?

H: Hang wallpaper. (Laughs)

I: You hang wallpaper!

H: The daughter, she's a professional, you know. She's got a lot of friends, and she hangs on her friends, and they come around, "Can you go over and wallpaper…?"

(end of side 1)

End of tape