

George_MacFarland_Nov 2011

This interview was conducted by Gary Haverlandt and Jan Caldwell.

Gary: My name is Gary Haverlandt and today is November 16, 2011. I am interviewing for the first time George MacFarland and this interview is taking place at the MacFarland property on Big Prairie, and this interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. When did you come to the North Fork for the first time and why?

George: My parents they purchased the Fenton homestead on Big Prairie about 1942 and then they ran some cattle and hired two men that stayed there. I don't quite recall what year I came up. There was a lot of state land inside the park at that time and there was a small prairie South of the Polebridge Ranger Station and we got a lease to cut hay on it. I remember helping to put up hay maybe about 1944. That's the first recollection I have, and then the family came up in the summertime about 1946 and then the first winter they stayed over is about 1947 there. So that's my recollection of the area there.

Gary: Do you remember about how old you were?

George: No. My teenage year.

Gary: What are some of the earliest memories that you have of the North Fork?

George: That's when we had the dude ranch so wound up taking people out on tours, 3-hour horseback rides. And then in the summer we put up hay on the main ranch and maybe like all teenage people that look back the summers went on and on forever. They seemed like they were a good 4 months long, but we spent a lot of time turning up hay and we had a big haystack and we also had a big barn that you had a special outfit, big tongs you could take hold of a stack of hay and hoist it up into the barn.

Gary: Mostly you had a lot of work to do.

George: Yes.

Gary: And I'm here today with Jan Caldwell and I should let him ask you a question or two. #4 is...

Jan: What was the North Fork like as you remember it?

George: I remember going down to the Polebridge store and it was still operated by Bill [O'Dare 00:04:01] and to get gas there was a pump on the front porch with a large glass window and for how many gallons you wanted Bill would operate a big handle and then the gas would come up to 1 gallon, 2 gallons, 3 gallon.

Then I remember one time Matt Brill came down and he had and his wife operated the dude ranch up in Trail Creek, so those were some of the old-timers that I didn't speak to but just briefly there.

Jan: I'll go ahead and do #4 too George. As you think back to that period what other North Fork residents made an impression on you?

George: [Marty Hadden, Scottie Beaton] who was on New Meadow Lookout. He had just sort of retired shortly after our family had moved here. He had the distinction of being up on Neuma for 20 years and not having reported a false fire and not having missed a fire. He retired with a special commendation from the Park Service. Then he would come over and we had a lot of ditches to dig and things and he would come over and work and then sometimes us boys would ski over to his place in the winter time. He had a small homestead set up on Acacola Creek. And then right behind the ranger station there was another homestead by an elderly man named Henry Colvy and then his nephew who was just a few years younger than he was, Bemus lived on that homestead and they had a couple of horses and they raised rabbits for food. That's all I can think of of the elderly homesteaders there.

Gary: Did you know many of the people on the other side of the river?

George: Yes. I knew Madge that had the place, the homestead almost on the border and she had 3 or 4 husbands, but the last husband he came down in the middle of winter, snowshoed down and he was a French Canadian, a beaver trapper. I then of course knew Lloyd and Ruth Sondreson quite well. When we would get snowed in in the winter time dad had a small Ford tractor but when the snow dripped in so he couldn't push it with his small tractor Lloyd and Ruth would come over and Lloyd would plow the road and widen it a lot from our place down to the ranger station so then my dad would be able to...then. My dad would be able to keep it open again with the Ford tractor. I just briefly knew the acquaintance of a number of the residents but the names I can't recall off the top of my head.

Gary: What was the daily life like and how was it different from life in most parts of the country?

George: All I can think of that is that the families that lived up here they just worked from dawn until dark in summer and winter. They didn't have as much relaxing time as the people have up here now.

Jan: Did most of them raise cattle or other animals?

George: Yes. A lot of them raised their cattle and then a lot of them had gardens and they worked awfully hard on their gardens.

- Gary: I was going to ask you, you said you were snowed in, you must have home-schooled up here?
- George: Yes.
- Gary: From what grades?
- George: Yeah. One thing I recall is that my mother actually had a teaching potential but she just really hated the home-schooling. That's all I have to say on it.
- Gary: Okay. [Laughing] Tell us about the North Fork social life.
- George: Dad thought that people needed to get together more so he and a number of people they organized the North Fork Improvement Association and then they would meet once a month at our place in the summer time. My dad was the first president and Walt Hammer was the second president they had, and then after the meeting they would have a square dance. They had a man and his wife called Hunt and Hunt played the violin and his wife played the piano, and a third man would call and the square dances often they would break at midnight to eat and then go on until about half past 1 in the morning. After a number of years they built a community hall that Larry Wilson doesn't talk about his column, but where Sondreson Hall is that land was donated. Madge donated the land for the hall and then they would alternate. Most of the meetings were held over there and then in the summertime when we would have square dances over there and then in the alternate week they would have the square dances would be held at our place.
- Gary: At the Quarter Circle Guest Ranch. I remember.
- George: The summer the first early dances were held up at Matt [Burrell's] place after he had sold that at his lodge up there and then the lodge burned down.
- Gary: Yeah, I remember some of the good times myself. Were you a member of any organization on the North Fork?
- George: Well my parents were of course members of the North Fork Improvement Association.
- Jan: #10 is a two-part question. What were the modes of transportation in the North Fork and the second part is what was the North Fork Road like?
- George: What people don't realize today is that the old Inside Park Road that was the main route up to North Fork and that was the route that the mail was designated to come on. They think that was up to about 1958 or something that was the way that most people drove up and the Forest Service Road was always very rough. During the mid 1950s there was grass growing in the middle of the road and at some point in the 1950s the Forest Service started to

work on the road and eventually by 1960...and then they changed the mail contract, took them up from Columbia Falls on that road.

Gary: Did it cross Polebridge at that time and go up the other side of the river?

George: Yes. When the mail came up the park side it would cross over Polebridge and then stop at the store and then of course there was a regular post office at the store, and then it would go on up to Trail Creek. Somebody in the Trail Creek area would take the post office up there and it changed around from the various people.

Gary: How did you communicate with other people on the North Fork?

George: There was a phone from the ranger station at Kintla Lake that ran all the way down for the people at Big Prairie and then went down to the ranger station at Polebridge and then went on down the inside road to the park headquarters. Then there was a phone line that went down the forest service side and I'm not sure whether it went to Columbia Falls, but it did also come over and went to the store I think and then came over to the ranger station at Polebridge. The ranger station in Polebridge could talk to people on the forest service line. I know that phone on the forest service side it went as far as Walt Hammer's place and it might have gone even up to Trail Creek. At some point I think in the 1950s the forest service station yanked it out without asking anybody about it.

My mother in the winter time the ranger's wife at the Polebridge Ranger Station would call up my mother when they both were bored in mid-winter and she would say, "Mary you want to hear an interesting conversation?" And then she would plug my mother into a conversation going on between two women on the forest service side.

Jan: And those were the old forest service crank phones.

George: Yes.

Jan: Everybody was on a party line.

George: Yes.

Jan: Do you remember your ring like it was one long and two shorts or something like that?

George: There were three of us kids in the family and two adults and mother and I'm sure it was pure happenstance, there were two longs and three shorts and then the Polebridge Ranger Station was two longs and they had the two adults there, and then I don't know... In Kintla Lake the phone ran all the way up to Newman Lookout and Scottie Beaton was as I mentioned a super alert person

and we had a small hot water heater on our place that one afternoon caught fire and we rushed up there to try to put it out then my dad rushed for the phone to call for the fire engine they had at the ranger station and he just picked up the phone and he heard Scottie Beaton talking to the ranger and Scottie Beaton said, "There's a fire at MacFarland's place I think between the 3rd and the 4th cabin." So they got their Dodge World War II surplus fire engine going and the carburetors plugged up and only could come up at about a mile and a half an hour, and they of course arrived after he had the fire completely out for about half an hour.

Jan: Had the fire out before the truck got here.

George: Yes.

Jan: #12 is what did you do for fun?

George: Yeah, I've been trying to think that over. We had bought a number of World War II life rafts and I think other people in the area did and started to float the North Fork. That was recreation. I remember one time I think some people had came up from the ranger station and my dad and them tried to float it in March and they got down about a mile and a half and then they... It was a warm spring and they thought it would be open and they could float all the way down to the ranger station, but I think the life rafts and then a number of local people took boats up to Bowman Lake and to Kintla Lake...small outboard motors. And then a good lake to fish used to be Quartz Lake and various people would go in there us on horseback or hike into there.

Jan: I remember you mentioned earlier that you took people out on horseback when you were out here at the dude ranch. After you got done doing that did you ever just go for a ride on your own and do some exploring?

George: Well I always personally...I'm ahead of my time; I was interested in mountain climbing. The park on the east side it had quite extensive mountain climbing and they had guides in the 1920s at mini glacier. But then when we first came into here the park just didn't want anybody to climb mountains and they really discouraged it. There was a one ranger [00:24:06] was just a natural born mountain climber and he began to mimeograph descriptions of how to climb the peaks of the park and sent one to every ranger station and some ranger stations just put his mimeograph booklet in the wastepaper basket. Then the local ranger station gave me the mimeograph, so that was my recreation was trying to attempt to climb some of the local mountains here.

Jan: Somebody mentioned to me that you tried or maybe actually made it up to Neuma Peak up above the lookout. Did you ever go clear to the top?

George: Yeah, yeah. It's a wild place. Yes.

- Jan: Do you any idea about how old you were when you did that?
- George: I was probably around 19. I was able...by happenstance, on difficult mountains I was able to get somebody who knew a lot more than I did about it and on Neuma a friend of a friend came by and he was the president of the Princeton Mountain [00:25:58] Club his last year and he was about 6'4 with tremendous arms and a very skilled mountain climber. We had climbed another mountain the year before and had some happenstantial things...part of the way up.
- Jan: You also climbed Rainbow Peak didn't you?
- George: Yes. That is...no complications on that peak. There's a number of routes you can take up the peak there. Probably the most...everybody tries to find different routes but probably the best and most direct route is supposed to be a trail from the lake up on the right hand side of the stream bed there that takes you up quite a ways, but you sort of aim for the other saddle between...going Square Peak. But the steepest of everything is the grass slope that goes up to the saddle there, just the last...it's about oh 500 feet or so of grass but it's just very steep and there's some lots interspersed with it but you just want to be very careful. It's just slick bare grass and so you just don't want to fall or you go heads over heels and hit one of the rocks, so you just need to be just very cautious and plant your feet on the topside of the bare grass there. But it's a long day and for ordinary hikers you leave the lakeshore at about 5 o'clock in the morning and take a little bit of a rest at the saddle there, and then I would rest on top, but you don't usually get back to the lake until 9 or 10 o'clock just at dusk there. My own advice is to just get an early start to leave the foot of the lake at 4 o'clock in the morning so you get up to the streambed that drains Square Peak and Rainbow you're up there at 5 o'clock in the morning to start going up.
- Then you have to be also watchful because there's grizzly bears on the face and the backside of Rainbow and so you want to keep... Once you leave the saddle between Square Peak and Rainbow you just want to scan the slope constantly for grizzly bears. Some people have gotten within 400 feet of the top and under the grizzly bear and would have to come back down.
- Jan: Have to turn around and go back.
- George: Yeah.
- Gary: Can you tell us about any major forest fires, the old forest fires maybe? Floods or ice storms or other major events that you experienced on North Fork?
- George: Well I was gone when the '64 flood came. They didn't have any big fires until recent years.
- Jan: Did the Red Bench Fire get fairly close to this area right there in Big Prairie?

George: Yes. It crossed at the South of the Prairie. I can't remember. I'm talking to the local ranger in the 1950s that every...those ridges we can see from Big Prairie, there's ridges from Bowman Lake that come down and then ridges from Quartz and then I don't think we can quite see it, ridges come down from Logging Lake and the fires were... Any lightening fire... We had a lot of dry years with no...lightening with no rain. In recent years in the last 3 years 2009-10-11 we've had lightening storms with lots and lots and lots of rain. Back in the early 1950s we had just so many dry lightning storms, but on these ridges they are very hard to get to where the lightening fires were and so they would drop smoke jumpers in so every single fire that occurred was ruthlessly suppressed. And then right from where we can see on Big Prairie, I forget exactly the year, but sort of the 1970s the area was just getting choked with lodge poles and the trees were getting stressed and the stressed trees invite the lodge pole beetle then we could look up on the hillside and see all this brown from all of the lodge pole that had been killed by the beetle. And then it spread from here and went down to White Fish and spread to other various places in the Flathead coming out of the North Fork area here.

When the Red Bench came in 1988 we had a lot of down beetle killed trees and also standing beetle killed trees. They said when the fire hit those trees and they had some wind behind it but they moved it up to 16 miles an hour which is one of the fastest rates that forest fires have been clocked at.

Gary: What are some of the other events that happened on the North Fork that you remember?

George: You probably recall better than I do all those other fires. There was a Moose fire and then in much more recent times a ranch fire that was very large. But I think long before my time the big fire was in 1929 and that started down by Half Moon always North of where the Blue Moon is. There's various theories of how that got started, but anyway that blew over to Kettle Mountain and then went up to North Fork almost to the Canadian border and then one arm of it came over on Huckleberry Mountain into Apgar and then went down and just bypassed park headquarters and then split and one arm of it went up the Middle Fork Canyon and another arm went down towards [00:36:24] and Korum. They said for the North Fork as the fire was coming the people just dug big holes on their property and buried all their furniture and then got gunny sacks and got in the middle of the river with the gunny sacks over them as the fire went by. But these are just what I've heard from other people and it would be...I don't know if you could interview people, I don't know how old they would be by now, but it would be good to get some firsthand interviews rather than secondhand interviews because that was the big major event up there.

And then the larch; there's all this standing dead larch and local mills cut that and that was a premium wood for flooring. When my family was building a

house in White Fish the fire killed larch was what was the flooring that everybody wanted to have. And then there was larch still standing I think up until the 1970s to 80s or something here.

Gary: What were some of the leaders or characters? There were some real characters on the North Fork. Do you remember any of them?

George: No. All that you have to get from people on the other side. There was a lot of...the North Fork in the 20s and 30s just had maybe the right average for the state at that time, but it just had a lot of people who didn't get along with each other. The superintendent of schools in White Fish he came out from Minnesota as a young man and he came out in 1926 I think, and he said...got up to North Fork in 1929 there were three people shot in the winter time over several months time and he said that the sheriff didn't want to...no way was he going to snowshoe up here in the middle of winter so the county coroner just put up that each of these people that were shot he put...a justified homicide is what he wrote and listed all three names.

Jan: Saved him a long trip coming up here.

George: But that was my dad's feeling that the North Fork Improvement Association would get people together and talking and bring more harmony to the area. We did have because we ran a dude ranch we were dependent on our mail. The Secretary of the Dude Ranches Association up at Billings and he would get inquiries for dude ranch vacations in mid-winter and then depending on what type of place they would like he would send inquiries to those ranches that might answer the peoples' questions, so we were really dependent on our mail. And the Holcolms a long time almost original people on the North Fork their daughter married a man called Ralph Day who was one of the laziest people on the earth and he got the mail contract. You are required to have the mail contract to have a vehicle that would go over the snow. In the late 1930s a man had a homestead called...Lyon was his name and he had a Model T Ford that he put skis on front and then had rigged up tracks on the back and it was a real going snow machine. But when Ralph Day took over the contract all he had was a jeep and he would try to start up from West Glacier and get bogged down and then he would say he made an attempt and they would give him pay for the week.

So my dad, we were just dependent on the mail to come and so my dad would file complaints with the post office department and then half the people up here they wanted mail, but the other half supported Ralph Day. Finally they would put pressure on him. One time Lloyd Sondreson rigged up a big sled and built sort of a cabin on this sled and then Ralph Day would bring the mail up with his [00:43:39] and it was pretty expensive to run the [00:43:43] all the way to Trail Creek, but they did that under pressure and nobody had gotten mail for a month or so. We were not in good stead with a number of the North Fork

people because of the mail situation, but eventually my dad bought a real small airplane so he could fly into West Glacier and pick up our mail and occasionally would pick up other peoples' mail locally too. And then about 1952 we moved down to [00:44:38] for the winter time and would get letters down there saying, we're up in the North Fork and we're not getting mail can you help us with our mail service?

Gary: Do you remember George how you celebrated holidays?

George: Well the big one was the 4th of July and the standard was a fish fry. Everybody would go out and... a number of people would go out and catch a lot of fish and would start to fry them up and they would have a baseball game and then they would eat the fish and as I remember have a square dance. That was always the big thing. A close friend of mine just said it always rained on the 4th and wouldn't last too long and the 4th of July would have a rain shower.

Jan: In the 4th of July Parade here the last few years you've been in it with your grandkids haven't you?

George: That's Jack.

Jan: Oh, that's Jack that gets all the kids organized?

George: Yeah.

Jan: I've seen them in the parade. That was always kind of fun.

Gary: What was Christmas and Thanksgiving like?

George: Thanksgiving we would invite Scottie over and then the homesteaders that lived behind the ranger station would come over, and then on Christmas I just remember one Christmas my parents had ordered presents and then the mail didn't come. My mother gave my dad a pair of socks he didn't know he owned and my dad gave her a can of varnish for her snow shoes. [Laughs]

Gary: Tell us about any close encounters you had with wild animals.

George: Did have one close encounter with a grizzly bear on Rainbow Peak there. And then there was a man by the name of Jim Vaughn who in 1950 he was a biologist from Oregon and he was hired by the Yukon government to go up and go into an area where white people hadn't much gone into there and he found it was very rich in minerals and calcium things. He found in there a moose with gigantic horns and they put together a paperback book. Then he had a movie he toured the country with and my dad was able to take a movie and talk to him and invited him up to the ranch in the spring for a couple of days. But in the movie he shows how the Indians up in this area could have tracked moose, the shoulder blade of a moose and then rub that again some

willows and another moose would get his horns all polished up to fight and the other moose would come right over and investigate. I always liked to explore around on foot and one time in the middle of summer I was going back through all this lodge pole and I looked down and here was a shoulder blade of a moose or an elk. I picked it up and I said well it probably won't make much noise on a jack pine here, so I rubbed it against the jack pine and it made a really amplified sound. I was really surprised. Suddenly I heard something moving and some big animal came about 50 feet away just charging through all this jack pine. I never picked up a shoulder blade since. [Laughs]

I had another time just walking back here. All through this country here there's a lot of places, a small creek and then the beaver dammed it up and created a pond and eventually the beaver would move on and the pond would dry up. Then if it had a lot of trees, dead trees that would be where the pond was like matchsticks. One time I just walked into one of these dried up ponds and all these windfalls and I started stepping across each one and stepping and then I was about two-thirds of the way across this pond and I stopped and looked up and here 15-feet in front of me was a cow moose. She never made any...she just stood there and watched me come up to her, so the only thing I knew to do was turn around and step over all these lodge poles and go back. I have seen some mountain lions, not very often, but once every 5 years or so.

Jan: What's your advice if someone runs into a grizzly? You mentioned up on Rainbow Peak, how did you handle that?

George: Well that's what the old-time local ranger...it's a lot of good sense, if you run into a grizzly he said I can't tell you what to do but if you can come back and tell me the story you did the right thing.

Gary: That's good advice.

George: Well, the thing is whenever you're walking make a lot of noise because noise noise noise and then I think the bear spray is very important. So many problems about the bear spray trying to get it out of the holster you can fire some right on the hip there, but you've got to get the safety off and everything. If I get charged I think I would be all thumbs and never be able to get it out. A number of years ago there was a young woman hiking and got charged by a bear and she got her bear spray out and pulled the trigger but it was pointed the wrong way and she sprayed herself and she just screamed a huge loud scream and the grizzly stopped in his tracks and he ran off.

The first and foremost thing that's very hard to get across to people, if you have a camera forget about it. Do not try to attempt to take a picture. When you meet up with a grizzly you want to communicate to the grizzly that you don't mean harm and you need a lot of unconscious things deep in your psyche to try to communicate this. The camera will just get you into trouble and not to

communicate this. We have the problem with hiking along if we don't make noise, it's a mother grizzly with young they are afraid of a male grizzly...getting attacked by a male grizzly which will try to kill the young. And so they are just very alert for anything that's trying to sneak up on them and then usually they come unglued, but the male grizzlies also it's deep in their genes that anything that's sneaking up on them is just bad news. And then we walk along upright which in grizzly language grizzlies stand up a lot to get a better view, but with standing upright in grizzly language is aggressive posturing. And then we've got a backpack on our back and that means the grizzly interprets this as hair standing up on our back which is another aggressive posturing. And then we stare at them which is also aggressiveness in bear language and then we bring up the big lens, the big eye and point it at them and that's being super aggressive. So we communicate all the wrong things when we meet the bear and with grizzlies if everything else goes wrong you can... Some of the manuals say to interlace your fingers over your neck but if you play guitar you want to protect your guitar fingers. But you want to be sure it's a grizzly because you definitely do not play dead with a mountain lion or play dead with a black bear, and so that's the problem there.

But the grizzly thinks we are a member of the grizzly clan and so if you play dead it's an unwritten thing of animal clans you don't maim or kill a member of your own species, and so they will just give us a couple of bites to put us out of commission and usually don't go in too far an inch, an inch and a half. They could snap off a whole leg or whole arm without anything, but that's just something that they don't do, so make sure it's a grizzly in a play dead role. Very very definitely do not try to climb a tree. A local ranger Jerry... was pulled out of a tree. Breaking off the limbs is a very aggressive sound in grizzly language. The adult grizzly can't climb trees but they haven't read the wildlife manual, so they can come right up a tree after you. They're not supposed to be able to do it but they can get up fast up the tree and then reach up and yank you out of the tree. The biggest thing is just making noise and not taking bears by surprise.

Gary: That sounds like really good advice George. Believe or not we're down to the last question. What kinds of changes have you seen over time?

George: Well here on the park on the road to Bowman Lake and road to Kintla Lake I've seen just a new type of driver, of driving small cars very aggressively. I've talked to a local ranger about it and I said is it my imagination that people are just driving aggressively the last couple of years? He says, "No, it's not your imagination." The maintenance man who collects the garbage from Bowman Lake and Kintla Lake he used to have a two-wheel drive pick-up with a long bed and every spring the park ordered a whole fleet of new pick-up trucks and depending what you do you can pick out the pick-up trade... It's probably been 4 or 5 years now, but I met the maintenance way on his way up to Kintla Lake and I just started staring at his pick-up truck and he had a short bed and all this

garbage he has to pick up I just didn't see the space for it. And then he saw me staring at the short bed and he turned to me and said, "I know it's short but I can dodge these people a lot better with this truck."

And then in real tight corners downhill I've had cars just trying to pass me coming the other way and I just get mad and I held out my hand and got them to stop and I said, "You just need to go slow here," and they just exploded me. They said, "I know this road; I've been driving this for years. I know how to drive!" Always always always meeting park trucks forever and ever. They just basically driving too fast the National Park Service of all the government departments it is supposed to have the worst record for driving and accidents. The trucks used to be orange and then they painted them green and you couldn't see them. Thank goodness they're going back to orange again.

Jan: Oh they are?

George: Yes. In a couple of years I was gone bouncing around the country working in other places and left my pick-up truck and mother here and she was taking some friends up to Bowman Lake for a picnic and I got back the next spring and she said, "George there's some scratches on your pick-up truck." It turned out that the maintenance man who is actually a good friend of my mother's they met him coming down the Bowman Lake Road as they were going up and he was driving the big garbage truck and so my mother was pulled off and stopped and he tried to her but he missed... touched it and put two dents, big long scratches across the door. And then he got wedged in and had to back up and then he put two higher scratches across the door. But I thought it was humorous. He was a real nice man and a good friend.

Just two years ago I was crossing... the ranger station to the Bowman Lake Bridge and met a big huge gravel truck and I had pulled off and it was just crossing the bridge and it was trying to roar past me and I got my hand out and I got him stopped and I just said, "You need to go slow. 50 years of bad driving on this road." I was so mad I filed a complaint with the ranger. But this year they've been doing a lot of work on Bowman Road particular up towards Kintla and when you meet one of the big gravel trucks they often stop, and they pull off and stop and boy that's a real change.

Jan: That's good.

01:05:06

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