

John Frederick_Fall_2011

John is interviewed by Debo Powers.

Debo: My name is Debo Powers and today is October 13, 2011. I'm interviewing for the first time John Frederick, Jr. This interview is taking place at 25 Beaver Drive in Polebridge, Montana. This interview is sponsored by the North Fork Landowners Association and is part of the North Fork History Project. So John tell us a little bit about your early background, like where you were born, when you were born.

John: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, almost in a taxi. I don't think my dad was calm enough to drive. He probably took a taxi. In fact my mother said they pushed me back in before the doctor got there. She said was big as a barrel. This was in Columbus, Ohio, and then I spent all my normal schooling in Marion, Ohio and in Ohio State University. I worked for a social service organization. I was the camp caretaker, went out and fixed things that didn't work. It was an old camp...like the 30s.

Debo: That's great.

John: And then I met my future wife. We made a visit out west and went to Glacier Park. I had never been to Glacier Park, and then the next year we moved here. But how I found the place...

Debo: What year was that?

John: It would have to be '75 was the trip and then in '76 I came back, but not up here quite yet.

Debo: And that year you came up to the North Fork?

John: Uh, no. No, it was after I came... I needed to come and find a place to live and so I found a cheap \$50 a month place where the roof leaked, but it was cheap and I had to go to Eureka to get the electricity turned on. Anyway, it was just a base and then I had a catalogue, and I can't remember the name of the company, they used to have a catalogue of the whole entire U.S. and I found one that interested me. It's what I call the Loon House up North that belongs to Doug Barnes, and I looked at it and then I found out my wife wanted to have a hostel. She had [lived in] them for four years off and on, and so I came back and saw this funky ugly place, a big log cabin with the front porch that was a porch to stand on, but it was just like a few logs sticking out. It was an unfinished porch. I said, "God that place is ugly." I drove up. I turned around and says, "That's ugly!" Turned around and left and then later thought about it and yeah, maybe I could do something something with it, and bought the place Halloween in 1978.

Debo: Where was that cabin?

John: The Hostel.

Debo: It was right there already?

John: Yeah, it was there. I've never built anything new. I had taken the place and done something to it.

Debo: What was it before you got it?

John: The fellow had like 5 kids and you know the kitchen is rather small, maybe 15 x 25. They lived in, all of them one winter in the attic, which is not an attic, it's just like a crawl space. I don't know how they did it but they did it, and I know they did it because I had to change the insulation from under the roof to the kitchen ceiling above. So anyway, he had a lot of kids and he was a house mover and he moved it there.

Debo: Where did it come from, do you know?

John: Glacier Park. It was on the MacFarland Ranch.

Debo: What are some of your earliest memories of the North Fork John?

John: Kind of an odd one. It was winter time and I had been at the hostel for a few days. I washed some clothes. I had a pair of red long johns union suit hanging in front of the stove there, and I had kind of a welcome wagon visit from Frank Evans. He came over and just welcomed me there and we talked for a bit. It was just kind of interesting. He was quite a character.

Debo: He was.

John: He's hard to explain to other people, but...

Debo: So he was one of the first people you met up here?

John: Yes, it was. He was.

Debo: What was the North Fork like in the late 70s? That was quite a while ago.

John: Actually I'll have to jump to the 80s a little bit because I don't remember, but in those days if you wanted to see somebody you went over and visited. And like now where we...some of us can e-mail each other or we've got a radio, can call each other, and either go that way or you don't see your neighbors. And there was a distinct difference by the way at that time because I moved here in 1980 full-time. That first summer of '79 was just a summer staying for a few months and then closed and then started up in 1980 and just

consecutively since then. But what was interesting is back then until about '95 or so we had a post office and that was another way we met people because we would go to the post office which was in the Polebridge Mercantile and kind of hang out a little bit, read our mail a little bit and meet all our neighbors there and have a little talk with them, what you been doing and so on, and that's distinctly gone now. We don't have that anymore, because people knew about what time the mail went and came and all that and they would come roughly about half an hour later back to when she was due...he was at that time and we sort of ran into each other.

The thing I remember was about the road. In the early '80s to mid '80s I remember I had a Volkswagen square back which is kind of like a tiny station-wagon and I drove it to the border and there were one big pair of [ruts] there and because the Volkswagen is narrow I could only put one wheel in and it would be kind of cockeyed and I drove it like that. It's come a long ways. People occasionally still complain about the road. In fact somebody came to visit somebody today and they went out of Columbia Falls a little ways and that part hasn't been worked on much and they just turned around and came back and went [South] again, even today. The northern part is quite nice. Clear to the border it's pretty decent.

Debo: There have been a lot of struggles about this road over the years haven't there?

John: Oh yeah. That's one of the reasons the Preservation was born – half, one-half of the reason.

Debo: One half of the reason for the North Fork Preservation Association?

John: The other reason for starting the Preservation Association was the coalmines in Canada, but then for something like 40 years they were threatening to put coalmines in there and they would do it in such a way that their [tailings] pond where they caught everything there was so much water up there, so much snowfall that they would just blow out. The debris would be in the river disregarding the problems of what the [soot] does to fish breathing well they don't breed well either because of the change in temperature. It would warm up a little bit and the temperatures they need for breeding would be not so good.

The road as we started talking about a minute ago and that was also 82. Both were 82 for up here, although the coalmine and the road issue was a lot older than that. The coalmine was about '74, keeps reappearing every so often even until quite recently. But the road is a big one. In a way it's bigger than just something to largely affect the river and perhaps a little bit of the air quality from the burning coal to wash the coal and that kind of thing.

- Debo: So the Preservation Association basically got started around the issues of the coalmines and not paving the North Fork Road?
- John: Yeah. The threat it was being paved in '82. There was a hearing on St. Patrick's Day March of '82 and then people showed up in droves. I forgot the statistics, but there were a lot more that did not want it paved than wanted it paved. And the road was not exactly favorable to drive on in those days. I'm sure all the tire companies just loved us up... Well a different way they loved it, sarcastic love because our tires kept breaking and we had to take them back and give us a new one.
- Debo: So when you first moved up here tell me about some of the old timers that were around in those days. I guess the homesteaders weren't around anymore, but who were some of the people that were still around?
- John: About 1984, maybe it was '82, I met Ralph Thayer. He's the Forest Service guy who laid out those trails that Debo Powers likes to walk.
- Debo: Did he really? He's the one that laid out all the trails [on the White Fish Range]?
- John: Almost all of them. There might have been a few like Indian trails that he just sort of picked up, but I think he was the guy who did it.
- Debo: Oh.
- John: In fact the [Divide] Trail is the Ralph Memorial Trail. [It hits 26]. I met him and he was an interesting fellow, a really really nice guy. I asked him about...because I heard something about him doing what would amount to the rafters in the mercantile as you're down below looking up. Or from above they were floor joists. He said, "Well if I had an ax I would show you how I did it." Anyway, he was living at the veterans home at that time and he didn't live a whole lot longer than that.
- Debo: Did he build the store?
- John: I got the impression he helped a little bit, but I think he built the [Ford] Station and his cabin is the way Nancy Hubble has so I assume he did that as well, because in those days there was not too many people who had money to pay somebody like they do now. Either you do it yourself or it doesn't happen.
- Debo: He was a surveyor too. Didn't he do a lot of surveys up here?
- John: Yeah. He surveyed the trails. I think he did those too. In those days if they didn't have what they call a boundary tree they would have a boundary hall and that was kind of an odd marker, a 4 x 4 x 4. There was a hole in the ground to tell you that was the corner of something. It would be hard to walk into in

the woods I think. I think it wasn't done too much, but that was one of the things they used if nothing else worked. I also met Ruth and Lloyd Sondreson. When I met Lloyd he had lupus so he couldn't converse very well because he was starting to lose his voice, but Ruth was around a long time until just a few years ago. I don't know what that would be a few years ago. It was 200-something when she died. This was about...quite a while before that. In fact she gave me an old military jeep and they are really sturdy, really sturdy. I looked at it this way and it was all bent and I asked her what happened and she said, "Oh, a couple was spooning and they hit a tree." So that's what happened to my...where my spare parts for my '41 military jeep came from.

Debo: Anybody else you remember at that time?

John: I mentioned Frank Evans because he wrote for the paper and then I followed him for two years in the political situation, except I was expendable and they kicked me off and Larry Wilson started doing it. He was nice about it. He told me it was happening which is more than the editor did of the Hungry Horse News.

Debo: What was the political situation?

John: Mr. Ladenberg, Tom Ladenberg] and another fellow were complaining about me to the point that they kicked me off the paper basically.

Debo: Because of your perspective probably.

John: Well, truly there was nothing in the paper that I wrote that I was aware of. I'm sure there was subtle little things that you can infer something to infer something to infer something, but I didn't put anything in there deliberately. But it was just you have a reputation whatever it might be and people will assume that rather than necessarily what's really happening. It happens all the time.

Debo: Yeah, it does. So when you first moved up to the North Fork it was pretty different from daily life in other places. What was...?

John: Well one big difference is well now I have a solar home. It's wonderful, here in Polebridge. But then if you wanted water you ran your own out on the pump or have a system like I did which you wore your arm out starting by a pull cord your generator. And so you would have a lot of racket because you in my case filled up a 500 or 600-gallon tank in the hostel upstairs. Did that if I was alone once a week or so, but when I had a busy summer it was every day. People don't save much water, unless you live up here you have a tendency to do that more than other places.

Debo: You do. That's true. No telephones, no electricity, no running water, outhouses.

- John: Oh yes.
- Debo: Old stove, lots of things huh?
- John: I forgot to mention the outhouses. That was a big difference. Some people never quite got on to that but I had it for 20 years until I moved into this house or longer.
- Debo: Now you've got a solar house and flush toilets and electricity.
- John: And you have a solar house anyway.
- Debo: I do too.
- John: Not necessarily a solar toilet though, a solar outhouse.
- Debo: So tell us about what the social life was like up here in the North Fork.
- John: Well as I was saying earlier you went to someone's else and I went to Frank Patali's and Ellen Horowitz's house about every weekend and we would make ice cream. We would crank it out. My job was I got lots of icicles on the hostel so I would pull off the icicles and that was the ice for the ice cream maker which is kind of a bucket with a crank on the side. I would fill it up with ice. I provided the ice cream maker too and they provided the rest to make the ice cream. And it was a little more personal in those days. We had one recipe that called for 9 eggs. I think now we'd all have real cholesterol problems if we had very many of that.
- Debo: Nine eggs in the ice cream huh?
- John: Hmm.
- Debo: So wasn't there a whole group of people that hung out up there around that neighborhood like Peter Moore and Greg Ouellette.
- John: Peter Moore, and there was a Matt. I forget his last name right now, but yeah. And from time to time there would be other people up here too. They would be here for a year or so and disappear, I mean move someplace else. They decided they could do it but maybe they didn't want to do it because it was kind of rough on the edges, especially in winter. Even now a lot of people live in the winter like I do.
- Debo: You used to do a lot of hiking up here too I remember.
- John: I did, just about every popular trail, and some were not even trails. We went up to...my friend Jack Johnson he was in his 80s, 70-something, like 75 years old or so when I met him and then I went hiking with him many trails that we

decided to go up [00:19:21]. There used to be a lookout up there once upon a time and we went up there and tried to follow the... The Forest Service maps in those days were even worse than today. They would have a trail and you couldn't even find it. You couldn't even begin to know where it went but there was a trail going up, so we decided if we went down that trail it would be a lot better than going up. At least we would end up in the right place because you just basically went downhill and you would hit a road, and there was no trail. We came up...it was a half a trail and then went down where there was no trail. We ran into Devil's [Cloak 00:20:12]. That's nasty stuff that's as tall as you are and really had some kind of huge barbs on it. It just made it really hard to kick through that, and so we just went down the creek bottom and left it. That's real interesting. We did the Review Mountain Loop. We went up through [00:20:37] Creek on the left and there's a trail going that way and went up to Review and we came back which is a better way to go because going the other way you just wonder where the trail went, and going the way I just mentioned you can find your way. Even if you've never been there before you can do it [00:21:00].

Anyway, we did decide, and I think it was a Saturday and on Monday it was his 85th Birthday and that's when he died. It was one heck of a hike and he did it, and he did just what he loved until almost the last minute and I respect that.

Debo: I remember hiking with him in the 80s.

John: I bet you do.

Debo: His Montana Wilderness Association hikes.

John: Yeah, because I had him for 10 years or so and then when I started going to Costa Rica I couldn't get it in my schedule properly. I don't think we had email in the earliest days, at least I didn't, so I kind of had to drop it. They wanted to [00:21:50] much earlier while I was in Costa Rica and I just couldn't get ahead enough to do it regularly. I remember hiking up to you to [00:21:58]. You took your own way and went up real high and your muscles were shaking.

Debo: A big snowfield was...

John: You went on the snowfield.

Debo: Yeah.

John: I get to hold the pretty French girl's hand and help her across this snowfield where you were up high shaking. You found your way back just fine. We just waited a couple of minutes.

Debo: So tell me about some of the fires around here that have happened in your lifetime in the North Fork.

John: Well the biggest one for me personally was the '88 fire, the [Red Bench] which was memorable for a number of reasons. The overhead people well they found it about...discovered it about 2 or 2:30, something like that in the afternoon. Richard Hildner can tell you a little bit about that. He was the observer with the district ranger Tom Hope who both up there looking at this fire, and they immediately would call it, it's a quarter acre, it's a half acre, it's an acre, just like that – boom boom boom. And the overhead that night met at the hostel because it was the biggest place close and somewhere I've got a picture of the chief fire person for the park signing over the park to the Forest Service for purposes of fire suppression. He couldn't find the superintendent that weekend or whatever it was. He couldn't find him and he had to do it anyway. He was a bit nervous about that. He had only a year or two left so he didn't care; he did it and it worked out fine. And then I don't remember, I think it was the next came it came through Polebridge.

Debo: That fast?

John: It may have been the day after but it was quick enough. Ron Wilhelm said he was up there with his small cat helping to see if they couldn't do something to stop the fire from spreading. No, it wasn't that kind of fire. It was one of those just get out of the way and hope for the best kind of fires. He said his track vehicle would go 7 miles an hour and that's the speed of the fire. He was right at it; he just stayed ahead of it. He was a very nervous fellow and he also incidentally I forgot to mention was the fellow who was the host for the first meeting of the North Fork Preservation Association when people voted to have it called that. He was the fellow moderating it. He now lives... He used to be here all the time. Some time ago he moved south to Columbia Falls.

Debo: So when the fire came into Polebridge I'm sure you were pretty scared that you were going to lose your place.

John: Well, I thought because we had a ball field to the North and the fire was coming west to east that the big yard of the hostel, and in fact it was mostly cottonwood trees which it still is today on that side would pretty much protect the hostel from any real problems. And some guy decided to spend the night with me and he got two...they call it shake and bake tents and we had them, so if we had to we would go in the middle of the yard so to speak. It's rather big for being called a yard, but it was rather large and we would just get in there if it came to that. And two Forest Service guys came by and squirted the hostel with some water just before the fire [proper...] hit there.

And when we went in the hostel we'd go through the kitchen and then close the door to the kitchen and go into the other part because it was better breathing there. The kitchen was a little too smoky. In fact that's where one of the curtains...the fire was close enough that the fire browned a curtain that was facing the fire.

- Debo: It was that close?
- John: Yeah. It was the garage that belonged to the Sondresons down there, it was on lot 1 which is where I had my horses for a short time. An acre is just too small but that's what I had at the time, and burnt it all up. Frank Bitali had got a tractor; I called it Big Red because I had Little Red the little tractor, the little red tractor. He put the logs together to make it.
- Debo: So what happened to your horses?
- John: My wife was Sharon at that time, she had taken them to town a while ago. She just disappeared with the horses.
- Debo: When you heard the fire was happening she just took the horses?
- John: Well horses are...I've never been around them in a fire, but as I understand it they get really stupid around fires. They go right into it. If a barn is on fire they will go into it anyway, so she took them south and they all got kennel cough. Like dogs get kennel cough when they [00:27:57]. The horses got some variation of that so they had to be treated.
- Debo: So the fire came right through here and could have taken the merc and the Northern Lights.
- John: Well actually if you look on top of the merc you'll see there's one or two parts of the metal, the sheets of metal that are newer than the rest and that's because the fire, they figured that there was a fire storm. In other words it's kind of a blow-up, the air is really rushing, that the firestorm lifted a little bit of the roofing just enough to get a spark in there. And the fellow who was the night manager for the fire saw that it was on fire. How he saw it I don't know because it was such minimal damage, but anyway he broke in the front of the merc and so he just went up there and hosed it down with a fire extinguisher and coughed a lot I think and saved the merc. Will Hamrick's father fixed it. He was a craftsman, a carpenter, he fixed the roof quite a long time ago.
- Debo: So the fire went through a lot of Polebridge too didn't it? Didn't it take some of the cabins in Polebridge?
- John: Oh it did. There was about 3 or 4 or 5 in here that burnt during that time, just gone and the whole fire was like out of 100 there were 20 that got burnt.
- Debo: And the bridge burned, the Polebridge.
- John: Oh yeah. I forgot about that. It certainly did. Usually bridges don't burn but this one happened to be wood on a top of a couple of huge monstrous I beams and they caught on fire. Everything was so dry. In fact on the hostel I had skylights, just little bitty things. Actually they were designed for a van. We

were so cheap. And so I put them in because that's what I could afford and there were burnt needles, pine needles in there. In fact the back of the hostel has kind of a crawl space, kind of an open space, there was some in there too and there were little bitty fires in the yard that just burnt out because there was no grass to speak of, just a little bit of dry grass... a little smoke and be gone. Yeah, I remember that better than any of the more recent ones.

Debo: Yeah, because it was right here.

John: We were threatened by it. I think I was the only one with another guy that spent the night with me that was in Polebridge. Everybody else was evacuated. I didn't know that until the next day.

Debo: But there were firefighters here, right? Or were they all evacuated too?

John: It depends. They do what they can before the fire and this kind of fire they just get out of the way and put themselves in a safe situation. So I think they were nearby but you would think they are right here; they're not. They would be in a field maybe to the North, the old hay meadow there at Hay Creek or Moran Creek or something like that.

Debo: So what made you decide to stay rather than evacuate?

John: Well at that time there was a guy... Earlier there was Mt. St. Helene's, one guy refused to leave. I think he died. But anyway, whatever his name was that's what Larry Wilson called me because I stayed. "That's stupid." Maybe it's stupid but I got away with it. There's no problem, so I was the only one here. Everybody else...

Debo: I would think that would be pretty scary.

John: Well, I had never seen trees explode before, but I had thought if the temperatures around the tree is such that the sap turns to a vapor – boom! I saw one blow in half from halfway up, more than halfway up. I had never seen that before. And I discovered that the cottonwoods may not burn very well but the branches burn off and you just have the trunk left, a charred trunk probably.

Debo: Is that what happened to the cottonwoods?

John: Hmm.

Debo: But they were still alive.

John: Well they were down in the roots, yeah, so they'd just come someplace else. They didn't all get that way but some of them did.

- Debo: So after the fire moved through the big part of the fire there was probably still spot fires around for a while?
- John: Yeah. Actually I had one of the back... I'm trying to remember the nice name for the backpack sprayers. I had a backpack sprayer and I had to go around and squirt some of the trees, like the spruce often. If nobody would cut any limbs they would go right to the ground and they would be smoldering, or I would see a little something smoldering and I would just go squirt them to keep the wind from blowing it up, because there often is a back burn. There was nothing much of anything here but there could have been, not because I did anything but it just didn't happen to happen.
- Debo: So that's fire. There's also been water, a big flood.
- John: In '95.
- Debo: In '95?
- John: Yeah. My two dogs and I left when it came in the front door. I canoed over to the merc.
- Debo: You could canoe all the way to the merc from the hostel?
- John: Well the merc property are pretty close, 100 to 200 feet away. I mean it was pretty close. The water was right down the road, but it was a little deeper over there for canoeing, worked better.
- Debo: Did you know it was coming?
- John: No, I didn't. Up North somebody like John Elliott he must have had a radio going or something because he managed to call the county disaster guy and tell him a lot of water was coming down the river. He was much further north but they didn't believe it. I mean there was no reason to think that because nothing they had in the U.S. picked up on that. They've seen done something so that they can tell if something like that happens again, but at that time it wasn't there. It's in place now. I think it has something to do with the Doppler effect they call it. But anyway they know it's coming in the future but at that time they didn't know, and the guy it turns out he was slowly dying of cancer and he just wasn't functioning very well anyway. A separate issue. I don't think they're particularly related, but he was not well, the guy who was the disaster coordinator for the county.
- Debo: So the water started rising on the river and that's when you first noticed it, was it was just coming up into your yard?
- John: Oh yeah.

- Debo: How fast was it, just in a day?
- John: The first clue was when the telephone went off. That meant the water was about between 2 and 3 feet high because it went into the pedestal and shorted it out. That was a clue.
- Debo: Was that in the daytime?
- John: Early evening some time. That was still the longer days, so it was daytime. It was light. In the middle of the night I went out and checked. I got up and I drove my Bronco clear down to lot 1 which is one I owned at the time, this subdivision. Just pulled it down the road where I knew it was a little higher and it was fine, but I thought well that was hard. I just barely made it so I don't think I'm going to ask anyone to move theirs because I don't think they'll make it. I just made it out.
- Debo: The water was already coming up into the road and stuff?
- John: Oh it was over the road, yeah. There's a dip there and it was probably 4 feet deep.
- Debo: Oh wow. That's pretty deep. Did you go back to the hostel at that point?
- John: Yeah, I went back to bed of course.
- Debo: You went back to bed?
- John: Yeah. I mean the river rises; it does that. Of course it never has before or since as far as I'm concerned like that, but I didn't really think it was going to keep coming.
- Debo: And it did.
- John: And it did. The next day it came into the house. I don't remember related to the earliest part of the day I don't remember, but I remember...well yeah, this happened earlier in the day, I started throwing televisions and stuff upstairs, things like that that might...if the water came into the house it would be better if some of the sensitive stuff wasn't there.
- Debo: And it came in the house then?
- John: Oh it did. It was 14 inches in the living room and close to 4 feet, not quite 4 feet, but close to 4 feet in the kitchen. There used to be marks in there you could see. I think they're there anymore to tell exactly how high it is. I thought holding my hand up and saying about this high was good enough.
- Debo: What a mess.

- John: I had a kayak in there and of course it floated up the road. I didn't want it blowing away. It was easier just to put it inside see. I did have to go hunting for my propane tank. It had leaked. I had just filled it up and propane apparently is a lot lighter than water and it floated away and all the gas went out.
- Debo: It floated down the river?
- John: No, it didn't go that far. It went as far as the first collection of trees. It caught it in a bunch of trees that were close together. It wasn't very far away.
- Debo: So you had a lot of damage in the hostel didn't you?
- John: It was a hell of a mess. It was mud mostly.
- Debo: I remember the summer a few months later after it was cleaned out there was still mud all over anything in the hostel it seemed like.
- John: Hmm. It was.
- Debo: Papers and things like that.
- John: In the cracks in the wood floors, they are just like 1 x 4s on the floor tongue to groove and the mud would get in them and we would have to take knives, kitchen knives and pry it out. It was a mess.
- Debo: That was pretty much of a disaster except the cabin stayed there.
- John: Yeah. And now the propane tank is tied down. It's staked. We had some other close calls but nothing like that. It just came up to a certain point and stopped. In '95 however I didn't know where my propane tank was for about 3 days and then [Jamie...00:40:24 son,] he said he saw one over there in a bunch of trees, and so I started walking around and I found it. And then a fellow named Richard Anderson was over at the merc filling up his tractor with gasoline and I said, "Say, can you give me a hand?" And he drug it probably about 100 yards or so back to where it belonged. It was quite a while before things were normal. Frank Batali brought me some 100-pounders so I had some propane and lights in the house, which is kind of nice.
- Debo: Yeah.
- John: Then the Montana Wilderness Association sent a work crew to help. It was Carrie Burn, what's her husband's name? Steve Thompson, Ben Long, and his wife Karen Nichols. There may been [Stormy Good 00:41:39]. I'm not sure. I think she was there helping out too and they did a work day and cleaned out the hostel.

Debo: It's good to have friends.

John: At that time Dick Walsh had the Walsh Cabin towards the prairie just on the edge. The rescue folks came with some water spring stuff and hosed it out and cleaned it up. He was one of the founding member of North Valley Rescue. An interesting time.

Debo: Interesting times. So fires, floods and how about big winter storms? Any big winter storms that got pretty bad?

John: I'm glad you mentioned that. It was just like the day before Thanksgiving, something like that, and there was 4 feet of powdered store out there and... I'm trying to think of the... Who writes for the Hungry Horse besides Larry Wilson? An old guy, older. I'll be right back.

Debo: Okay.

John: The George Austrom!

Debo: George Austrom.

John: The George Austrom was very worried about his son Shannon. Shannon has something like MD, muscular dystrophy or something similar to that and he was up there at Moose City. He was trapped. What was to do? Well I got on with Lee Downs in his big Ford pick-up truck and we go a mile or so and he would have to clean the radiator off because it was full of snow. It would cut off the cooling effects. It would overhead. He would clean it off, clean out the air filter because of the snow. It was such powder it went into the air cleaner too, and so we went clear to the border like that and almost to the border, I can't remember his name, but a logger came ahead of us with a plow on his pick-up and he was really moving and it's the last little bit to Moose City so we could drive right to Moose City a little easier with the snowplow, and they were down to a couple of candy bars, and so they were very happy to see us. What had happened was they had parked their car on that little shelter by the part of the border customs building, they had parked it there and it wouldn't start, and so they just kind of sat there until we got there. Anyway, we got them out. They were very glad to see us. But that was about the most snow I had seen, starts 4 feet of snow and the next day it's about 3 feet. It just settles – 3 feet, 2 feet and it stayed about like that. That's the most I remember.

Debo: Well one thing I noticed is there's a sign on your wall of your cabin that says North Fork Crusader #1. Who gave you that sign? I mean you have a reputation of being a crusader for the North Fork. Do you remember who gave you that?

John: I know who made that.

Debo: Who made it?

John: Jerry or Richard [00:45:41] did; I'm not sure which one of them. And then there's a picture here that you best describe it, it was part of the [00:45:48 same] too.

Debo: Oh yeah. Thanks to our Voice in the Wilderness it's a picture of you kissing a grizzly bear.

John: Yeah. That was drawn by Carol [Burchetti].

Debo: And there's a wolf on there too.

John: And Cheryl Watts organized this thing at the hostel and the pictures on the wall here, how many would you judge to be up there in the pictures? Just make a wild guess.

Debo: 40.

John: 40?

Debo: 50? I don't know, how many.

John: 40 sounds right but I never counted them.

Debo: Yeah.

John: I never did, but anyway I've got a picture of all the people there and it was very...I appreciated it anyway.

Debo: We appreciate you for all the work you've done up here to try to protect the environment of the North Fork.

John: Oddly enough I don't get very many thank you's. I don't. When I get them I'm very grateful.

Debo: Can you think of any other big struggles up here, environmental struggles?

John: Oh the coal mine it was a big one. I was involved in all of the series starting in '82 and so 1982 is when it heated up again, so I bought a few shares of stock in the parent company called [Rio...00:47:28] of the one that was here. Sage Creek Coal Limited was the name of it, and so I went like 6 times and the first time...we didn't have a second. I made a stockholders proposal of the company.

Debo: So you went to the stockholders meetings?

- John: In Toronto, yeah, did that for like 6 years. After a while I couldn't afford it and then the MWA took a collection so I could go. I would also visit my parents in Ohio so it wasn't such a hardship as it sounded like because I was going to go see them anyway.
- Debo: So you would make a motion and there wouldn't be a second? What would your motion be, to close the coalmine down?
- John: Yeah, for this reason for that reason for the other reason and this reason and more reasons that recommend that you not pursue it any further. I forget exactly how we put it, but don't do it in short. And in 1988 I got a letter written in sort of English English saying that the Sage Creek Coalmine was no longer of significant interest to the [Rio-algum 00:48:50]. And I called the guy up and I says, "What's that mean?" "It means we're not going to do it."
- Debo: Yay!
- John: That was good. Yeah, yay! That was a yay, and later on other companies wanted to do it. The first one wanted to use the exact same location. Well after a little discussion with them they realized that if the International Joint Commission was to get involved since the mine was identical it wouldn't go. So the same company tried it in a different place and they were somewhat discouraged from doing it. And then more recently after 30 years or more of cajoling the Canadians and trying to be good neighbors we finally got an agreement between Gordon Campbell, the Premier of BC and Brian Schweitzer, the Governor of Montana, such that they would not have oil and gas in [00:49:56].
- Debo: Yay.
- John: Of course that leaves, they have what they have coal blocks which are the federal; the others are provincial, so there's still some coal blocks up there that belongs to the provincial government, so there's still a little question mark up there but I think it's going to be all right.
- Debo: Thank you for all your work with that.
- John: I tried.
- Debo: It was successful.
- John: Well luckily I hardly was alone or we wouldn't have got that far.
- Debo: So you mentioned some of the people up here in the North Fork and I wonder like some of the leaders and characters of the North Fork, you've mentioned a few of them but can you think of other leaders and characters up here?

- John: Well he was never a leader but he was kind of influence, that's Tom [Lidenberg]. He had on boots and he would always put one pant leg inside the boot and leave the other one out. He just did this. It was standard operating procedure for him. And if there's always something real redneck he would say it. He would be the one.
- Debo: He was definitely the character.
- John: He was. He was that.
- Debo: But he put a conservation easement on his property.
- John: He did. Marilyn Wood still with the Nature Conservatory managed to get that before they came to her, which was a big one. When that happened Nature Conservatory felt they had done their part here and they were kind of pulling out of this area because that was such a big one.
- Debo: That was a big one.
- John: Later on when this agreement between BC and Montana that we would match what they did and they wouldn't have oil and gas and the North Fork wouldn't have any oil and gas exploration the companies that had put money into exploration wanted their money back, which was not totally unreasonable. So that was part of the agreement that they would be paid back, the Montana BC agreement, so the Nature Conservatory of both the U.S. and Canada worked on the fund. They got the price way down compared to what they probably said it was initially, a lockdown of about 9-million. It sounds like a lot to me, but anywhere they're raising the money. And the Preservation Association which I'm often a perennial president came up with a thousand or two dollars to give them, and I think it was matched by somebody else, by [00:53:15].
- Debo: Great.
- John: So the Nature Conservatory got back in the area in a different way than it had previously, but in a big way. None of us little guys can... little organizations can deal with 9-million.
- Debo: No, ever, in a lifetime.
- John: No.
- Debo: That's right. Well, what are some of the close encounters you've had with animals around here in the North Fork?
- John: Someone else might call them close encounters, I wouldn't. I had a bear in my backyard and I was watching from the porch. They were just running through, a grizzly bear. I'm trying to remember if it was a mom or a cub or just a

female, but anyway at least one bear just went through. And another time a bear was a little too close and to get out of the area if you pull your shotgun to the side and if you're a great distance and the bear is facing the wrong way, the other way you can pepper them and encourage them to get out without hurting them any, the distance of just like a little hurt and I did that to one bear to get it out of there, to protect the bear too. It came back but was caught in the trap. They called him Fred.

Debo: How many years ago was that?

John: Honestly I don't remember, but Lynn Ogle took a picture of the bear and put the date on it. It's over in the hostel on a picture there. I didn't take that picture. I left it there.

Debo: On your hikes, all your hikes you did in the wilderness did you have any bear encounters?

John: I forgot about this one. I was just with a friend of mine whose name will come to me in a moment, Dick Kuhl, we were doing the Review Mountain Loop and coming back on the final stretch and it was probably July and there were still patches of snow here and there and we could tell a bear was ahead of us. And we watched him from a distance and he was just standing on the trail looking at us. This was quite a distance, and so we just bushwhacked straight down to the road there. That's the only time I can think of right now. I guess I was close to one in the park at [Quartz 00:56:25] Campground there, upper Quartz, and we were at the place you were supposed to cook your food and about 50 yards away or maybe closer and up on a tiny block was a grizzly bear watching us eat. So I told everybody bang the pots and make lots of noise and it left. Nothing happened. Sometimes if you know what to do it helps a lot.

Debo: It does. So you've been in the North Fork for quite a long time and you've lived here full-time most of the time.

John: I've never seen a wolverine.

Debo: Never seen a wolverine?

John: 30 years, 30-something years – 32 this year, I've never seen a wolverine.

Debo: I've only seen one. That was in the park.

John: The Preservation Association is writing a letter they should close the trapping season on wolverines. They're likely to be listed next year.

Debo: There's so few of them.

- John: It's endangered, yeah, and they can get... Their living is so precarious that just one or two taken out could take out that small population. The one question you had written down, tell us about the North Fork social life. What do you do for fun? We hike, we read, we ski and tell lies.
- Debo: And tell lies? [Laughs]
- John: That's what we do.
- Debo: Well storytelling has a long tradition.
- John: Well you can describe it differently, elaborate a little bit.
- Debo: That's right.
- John: That's always okay.
- Debo: That's always good, yeah. Well you've been here a long time, what are some of the big changes you've seen happen in the North Fork?
- John: Well, when I came and when you started coming the people here mostly poor folks and we did a lot of stuff ourselves or it didn't get done or you couldn't afford it, simple.
- Debo: That's right.
- John: And now people with money are building really nice places and there's nothing wrong with that, it's just a change. And so we now have a constituency for the North Fork that might be a little more powerful. That's how I look at it.
- Debo: That's a good way to look at it.
- John: Yeah.
- Debo: So are there any other things that you would like to talk about that I haven't asked you?
- John: I'm sure there are but I can't think of them at this particular moment.
- Debo: Oh, let me ask you this. A lot of times call you the Mayor of Polebridge.
- John: Oh.
- Debo: How did that happen? Where did that start?
- John: I think it was like '80 or '81, '82 perhaps, but I think it was '81. John O'Hara had this saloon and he thought he would do a little something every week to kind of encourage people to come and get in the habit of coming. He said,

“Okay, next weekend we’re going to have an election to see who is the Mayor of Polebridge.” The previous mayor was Tom Ladenberg, so Tom Ladenberg was the other potential mayor, and so the next week Tom didn’t show up, so I figured I got the election by default, and even people who didn’t know anything about that started calling me the Mayor of Polebridge, so that’s how it happened. And the pay isn’t much.

Debo: Yeah. They don’t pay you much for that job.

John: I wanted to make cards, the Mayor of Polebridge, responsible for nothing, take the credit for everything, responsible for nothing.

Debo: [Laughs] That’s pretty good. Oh, one other question, you ran the hostel for lots of years and then you sold it. Tell us about that story, like that transition.

John: Well the transition is a story and a half. About year 17 I had the hostel I didn’t do as well as I did earlier. I wasn’t as patient with people so I started to need people to help me so I didn’t do it all day long. And when it got close to 30 years I wasn’t even there anymore. I would be a substitute for the [01:01:28] and Oliver Meister, a German fellow who had been coming since ’92 was running the hostel. I got him... A green card is really not what it is. It’s Alien Certification of Labor is what it’s called and I managed to get him one, had to hire a lawyer to do that and I did that. Then after 5 years I sold it to him, but that’s a little quicker story because he wanted to buy it, but when it came the time for me to want to sell he had cold feet. So Debbie Kaufman and her husband Dan used to have the merc and one of the things Debbie did was buy a property and flip it. She would fix it up and resell it at a greater price. And so I talked to her, had her come over and talk about buying the hostel. She promised me that she would keep it within the family and never sell it; it would be there where she could send people, her family and stuff when they visit her here or she could live there herself. Well, Oliver didn’t take to that very well. Anyway, he bought the hostel after that. It took a little nudging.

Debo: I didn’t know that story.

John: Well, yeah. There’s probably a lot of stories you don’t know.

Debo: You still live pretty close to the hostel.

John: Yeah, well when I bought this place I wasn’t planning to sell the hostel. It’s just that I needed more space than what I had.

Debo: After 30 years that’s a long time, almost 30 years. How long was it?

John: 20-something. I could spend 5 minutes trying to figure it out but it’s not that big of a deal.

Debo: Yeah. It's not that big of a deal. Well John you've been a really important character in the North Fork for a long time and I appreciate this interview with you.

John: Well if you're going to call me a character I'm not sure I like the interview.

Debo: I think that's a good word.

John: Okay, I'll take it as a compliment of sorts.

Debo: I think it's a compliment because it shows an interesting personality and creativity and not just a regular old run of the mill type person. I think the North Fork is full of characters.

John: It is, they end up here. Some of them do better than others, like what's his name that burned down the [01:04:32]?

Debo: [Laughs] I don't know who that was.

John: Well you should it's right near you.

Debo: Oh, right.

John: I just can't think of his name. He would have a little dog on the road and he would make the dog circle around, make a little circle and keep going. He was always on the road with a little dog, Bubba, and Bubba died.

Debo: Yeah, lots of characters on the North Fork. That was a great interview John. On behalf of the North Fork Landowners Association and the North Fork History Project I would like to thank you for your time.

01:05:11

[End of recording]