

Idaho Panhandle Oral History Project
Interview with Don Peterson
October 22, 1979
Bonners Ferry Ranger Station
Interviewed by David Barton
Questionnaire Information

DP = Don Peterson
DB = David Barton

Tape 12, Side 1

DP: Born in '29. Sandpoint, Idaho.
DB: And do any of your family still live in north Idaho?
DP: Yea. Biggest share of the family lives here. Folks live
in Sandpoint. They moved into the country in '22.
DB: I see. So your parents moved in 1922?
DP: Yes.
DB: And you've been living here ever since?
DP: Hm-hm.
DB: Where did your family come from before you moved to...?
DP: Wisconsin.
DB: What part of Wisconsin?
DP: Superior.
DB: And what kind of work did your father do before...?
DP: He-he. He started working for Humbird Lumber Company, as
an overhead crane operator. And then he worked on the
railroad, and he worked Pole Company, that is now out of
business and then he worked Diamond. National at Kootenai,
as a warehouseman and as a brakeman on the trains that they
had--logging trains.
DB: What was the railroad company that he worked for?
DP: The SI--Spokane International.
DB: And, was he also working on that when he worked for Diamond?
DP: No. He worked...quit there and went to work for Diamond.
DB: Did they have their own car set-up--train cars?
DP: Yes. Diamond, actually, was the first diesel-electric
locomotives in this country. They had two of them. And,
they hauled about 20 car loads of logs a day, out of
Lightning Creek. Rapid Lightning.
DB: Where is that located in relation to Bonners Ferry?
DP: It's...their roundhouse and that was out at Kootenai just
east of Sandpoint. And, Rapid Lightning is, oh...
approximately northeast of Sandpoint.
DB: Is that still there?
DP: The buil...the last time I was by there the buildings are
still there.
DB: Do you have any idea when that shut down?
DP: When did that shut down? Trying to think, it was around
'41.
DB: When he worked for the log railroad, with Spokane
International, what did he do?

DP: He was just section gang.
DB: What did he do when he worked for Diamond International, what kind of work?
DP: He was a warehouseman at night and brakeman during the day time.
DB: Have you always...has your family always lived in Sandpoint?
DP: Yes.
DB: When did you move up to the Bonners Ferry area?
DP: Ah...let's see...1970 I was transferred up here.
DB: And ah...just to give us an idea, what kind of occupations have you done?
DP: Mainly, most of my life...I started Forest Service when I was 16. And, started up at Priest Lake, worked there three, four years, and then Sandpoint for about 10 seasons--Forest Service; and then over at Trout Creek; Knox and a couple of seasons. Down at Magee for t...eight years, out of Coeur d'Alene, and then I came up here in '70. And, been here ever since.
DB: I see. I'm sure in that period of time you must have done just about everything they had.
DP: Yea.
DB: What are some of the jobs that you did with the Forest Service?
DP: I...mainly been in fire control; I've worked timber crews; and scaling; layout sales. Worked engineering, on surveying roads. The TSI plant and stocking surveys.
DB: What is involved in cruising?
DP: Cruising involves, laying out your sales units on the sale and then marking the timber for what you want cut, and that. And then going in and measuring the trees, whether it's a random plot or fixed plot, to come up with an estimated volume that you are gonna leave on the ground, and what you're gonna cut. And, used to be we used to have to hand count--calculate these, and now we run it through the computer. The computer comes up with all your age classes and everything else, now, whereas we never before.
DB: What were some of the other duties that you did with the Forest Service, let's say in fire control?
DP: Mainly fighting fire. Spent most of my career fighting fire, and then for four years I had the IR crew out at Coeur d'Alene. I started that.
DB: What does IR stand for?
DP: Inter-regional Fire Crew. And, we travelled all over the West, and Alaska. What I had done. And, we done some rehab work after fires, planting grass, erosion barriers, this type of thing. And, of course, done all the paper work, which getting to be something else again.
DB: I imagine, it sure is. OK. You say, you did it all over the West; how did...you said you helped design this IR crew?

DP: The one that they had at Coeur d'Alene, yes. I had to formulate the training package and hire the personnel and everything.

DB: What kind of personnel would it take to be on a crew like that?

DP: Those were, were mainly about 18, 19, 20 year old...lot of 'em were college students, you'd get a few locals.

DB: How many people were on the teams?

DP: 20.

DB: And how many teams were there?

DP: Let's see...at that time the region had nine. Scattered around the region.

DB: What states did you work in?

DP: We worked in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado.

DB: Specifically in Idaho, what were some of the major fires that you worked on over the last...?

DP: Oh boy. Worked on the Sundance, eh...

DB: Could you...I'm not so familiar with the years, could you?

DP: That's in 1967. Burned 56,000 acres--right over here, between here and Priest Lake. Ah. Hmm...haven't worked on too many major ones in Idaho. Worked on one in Alaska, was the first one they had in 10 years up there--the Forest Service. BLM has a lot of them up there, but the Forest Service doesn't.

DB: So, you started in '45 with the Forest Service, right?

DP: Yea.

DB: Was there a major fire that year down south in Coeur d'Alene?

DP: They had the Brush Lake Fire up north here. I was on lookout, first three years. And, ah...I'm trying to think of the year that they had the Manning Gulch Fire. It was either '45 or '46...that 13 smokejumpers were killed on. That was over in Montana in the headwaters of the Missouri.

DB: Well, to get back a little bit to your early years in Sandpoint. Do you remember much about the house you lived in, in Sandpoint, is that the house your parents still live in?

DP: No. We lived down on 518 South Florence. And that was just a small house. Nine youngsters. Ah...during the Depression, not too much work.

DB: What kind of a house was it?

DP: Oh, trying to think. About four bedrooms but small, small bedrooms. And the lot was big enough to have a good garden on. We had a garage out back we kept a cow in, for milk. Few chickens.

DB: What kind of things did you grow in the garden?

DP: About the same they do now--corn, potatoes, and carrots, peas, this kind of thing.

DB: What...did your neighborhood in Sandpoint have a name?

DP: No, it's just...the only thing that we referred to was the South End and North End of town. North end of town was all company houses--Humbird Lumber company.

DB: Were those the workers houses?

DP: That's...they started out as worker's houses for the company. And the other people worked at other jobs and they could afford it, bought in the South End of town. They had a company store and the company houses, that type thing. It was a pretty big operation.

DB: Were many of the houses in Sandpoint like the house that your family lived in?

DP: Lot of the houses at that time were built similar.

DB: You say it had four small bedrooms, was it a two story house?

DP: No, it's single story.

DB: How were the rooms laid out?

DP: As you come in, there was the living room, off to one side was the bedroom, and next to that was...the living room went the whole length...pretty near the whole length of the house, and off on the right was kitchen, and then on the back was two more bedrooms, that were added on as the children were born.

DB: So it was about a six room house?

DP: Trying to think. There was only three bedrooms, at the time. Five room house. Most of them, what they did, they just took a square house, and then as the family got bigger, they added on.

DB: In your neighborhood were there any...what kinds of ethnic groups were living in your neighborhood, do you remember?

DP: Not really. I was 10 years old when we moved out of there.

DB: I see. And, then you moved to another house in Sandpoint area?

DP: We moved up...up to Selle, north of Sandpoint, up ten miles, on a farm.

DB: Do you ever recall anybody talking about what was involved in homesteading back in the early days, say when you were a boy listening to people talk, about homesteading?

DP: About the only thing that I can remember, about homesteading, was people giving up their homestead rights because they couldn't make a go on the ground that they selected.

DB: When you say they couldn't make a go on it, what does that mean?

DP: The ground was too harsh, rocky and that to raise a garden, cow and that.

DB: What kind of improvements would they have to make on the property?

DP: I can't remember. I think they had to have a house and clear five acres, to prove up on homesteading.

DB: And, then do you remember how long...how many years they had to do that?

DP: No, I don't.

DB: Do you have any idea how old the house was that you lived in when you moved into, or when you were born into it?

DP: No.

DB: Did the house have a stove in it or...?

DP: Wood stove.

DB: Wood stove. How about water, did it have city water?

DP: That's running water. It had the old wooden water mains. You remember them freezing and busting.

DB: Did Humbird Lumber Company make the mains, or do you remember who did that?

DP: No, they bought the mains. They were...I don't know that type of wood or that, but they were wrapped with wire. And, they're still digging them up down there.

DB: So, they still have some left?

DP: Yea.

DB: Did your...you say your family had a barn out in back with a cow, for getting milk, was there any sort of root cellar?

DP: No...ah...we had a space underneath the house that was a root cellar, you see.

DB: Where did people take their refuse, back in the '20s or '30s, say?

DP: You mean garbage and that?

DB: Aha.

DP: They had a garbage pit out on Pine Street. And, usually you had a trailer or something that you took it out with.

DB: So, you live out on the South side, I take it? Was everybody...well, most families, pretty friendly with one another?

DP: Yea. Everybody trying to help everybody. If somebody's house burned down, why we all get together and rebuild the house. If somebody wanted to shingle a garage, why they'd buy a keg of beer, and some day they all get together and throw the roof on it and...and they'd have cheese and beer.

DB: Was that common in Sandpoint, do you have any idea?

DP: Yea. It was quite common. It was quite common in the country too. Where people had to travel. I can remember horse and buggy, at that time, and people would come over on the weekend and help throw up a barn, or house.

DB: How big was your neighborhood, back then? How many blocks do you think it would have covered? I know you were pretty young when you were living there, but...?

DP: The South End of town would probably cover...the outskirts of town was just one block west of us and it went...about nine blocks east.

DB: And what was the address again, I'm sorry?

DP: 518 South Florence.

DB: South Florence?
DP: Yea.
DB: What...in relation to First Street, where would that be?
DP: That would be to the...the west.
DB: And south?
DP: Southwest. Yea.
DB: Were there any people that had special crafts in your neighborhood, that you can remember like blacksmith or...?
DP: No. At that time everybody done a little bit of everything. I can remember the blacksmiths for Diamond National. And there was others...like Dryer's dad was a blacksmith.
DB: Were there any taxidermists or anything like that?
DP: No.
DB: How about...let's see...any bootmakers or anybody like that around?
DP: There you had the shoeshops downtown. Dick Roeshalt was in business at that time. His boy has got the shop now. I was trying to think, there was a couple others, in town.
DB: Did your family go to church, at all?
DP: Not too much. I went to Lutheran church when we lived in town.
DB: Is that the German Lutheran Church?
DP: You can't, you can't...I couldn't prove it. Mom and dad were so busy, but they never did go.
DB: Do you remember which denominations were...seemed to be most common in Sandpoint, in the '30s?
DP: Lutherans, Catholics. Can't remember the name; there was one Christian Church. But I can't...there was something before the Christian.
DB: Where did the kids go to school, in the '30s?
DP: They had the...they had a grade school right in the neighborhood, called the Washington School. It's still being used. Ah...the Farmin School out north was being used at that time, still being used. No, the Farmin was torn down. The new Farmin is out, ah...
DP: Yes sir.
XM: Hello. Yes, could you give me some information please?
DP: Hm-hm.
XM: Is there any...
(BREAK IN TAPE)
XM: We thank you.
DP: You're welcome.
DB: Speaking of cabins. What are some of the old cabins that would be around this area?
DP: West Fork was built, I think...Osborn Center was built around '27, something like that.
DB: So, that's a National Forest Service, sort of an out station?
DP: Well, we just use it for, snow course in the winter. To run snow depth and water content, and that on it.

DB: Are there any other old cabins around?
DP: There's the old lookouts. We have one on Burton, one on Russell, one on Ruby Ridge, two steel towers left--West Fork and Saddle Mountain.
DB: When were these all built? In what general time period?
DP: The old lookouts, were built during the three C days, mainly. They're log cabin type. Built from '29 to about '36, in there or '34. The two steel towers were erected towards the latter part of the '40s. They're both 90 foot.
DB: To get back to when you were a boy in Sandpoint. What were the stores that people commonly went to back then, did they have the...still have the Humbird Store.
DP: Yea, the...I can't remember what year they closed Humbird down. But I can vaguely remember the company store. It's where the roller rink is now. And, then there was some other markets on Main Street down there. The Economy Grocery, seems like it's been there ever since I can remember.
DB: What kind of clothes did people wear for work clothes, do you remember? The loggers?
DP: In Wintertime it was all wool. Everything was wool--shirts, pants. I can't remember too much about Summer. It seemed to me that some of them wore bib overalls, and some of them wore Levi type pants. But they staggged them. They were all staggged on top of their boots.
DB: How tall were their boots?
DP: Most generally eight inch. Eight to 10 inch. Once in a while, on the river you'd run into a 12 inch boot. I don't know why they wore a higher boot on their drives.
DB: How about when you started with the Forest Service, what was a typical day like, when you were 16 and you started work?
DP: Oh, we started out working trails, before we went on the lookout. Typical day would be--get up about six in the morning, eat breakfast, go to work on trail, cut the logs out and brush, and get back in...oh, around five. If you were close to finishing a trail you might stay out and finish it and get in at eight or nine at night. With the understanding someday, it was raining you'd stay in camp. On lookout, typical day--get up about daylight, breakfast, wash the dishes, go after water, wash windows, floors, read, and while you're doing that you're looking around constantly. And then in the evening, you get on the phone and talk to just about any district you wanted. They can...all the districts were tied together, through switchboards.
DB: What was the preferred job, of those two?
DP: I liked trail work. Trail work, telephone work. Probably, to me is still the best job I ever had.
DB: Did you ever work for a private logging company?

DP: I sawed a couple of years in the woods. And, then in...during the Winter, why I worked down here packover on the green chain. For a while.

DB: You did what?

DP: Worked on the green chain--packover.

DB: What were you doing?

DP: Pulling lumber and stacking.

DB: Would that have been pulling it from the mill as it's coming out?

DP: Yea. There's two types of green chains. You have one where it comes off and you have to stand there and pull it off the chain. LP's got that type. Packover's got a drop chain, where the sorter throws it in slots and it comes out and it drops off on the skids--to size. And you can let the skids build up and then go over and stack your lumber. You get your skid back down and then go to another skid. And, it takes less people. On the sorting type green chain then it does one that doesn't sort.

DB: When you were working in the logging camps as a sawyer, up here around Bonners Ferry...is that where you worked?

DP: I never did stay in camp. I worked between here and Sandpoint but...as sawyer. One year cutting poles, and another year sawing logs.

DB: Was that out in the woods you were working?

DP: Yea.

DB: What kinds of people did they have out there? I mean what kinds of jobs did they have, what were the names for the jobs?

DP: You had your sawyers and you had your skidder operators, or dozer operators--didn't have your two-four wheel skidders; rubber-tired skidders at that time. And then you had what you call a pimp--or choker setter; set the chokers and hooked them on to the Cat.

DB: What job did each one of these do, for instance what was the sawyer responsible for?

DP: The sawyer was responsible for falling the timber and buckin' it up into lengths.

DB: So, he cut it down and he cut it to length?

DP: And limbed it. And your...

DB: What tools did he have?

DP: Up until the chain saw came in, all he had was crosscut and axe, hammer and wedge.

DB: When did the chainsaw replace the...?

DP: Ah, I was trying to think. I think it was around 1947 that I used the first two-man saw in the woods.

DB: Two-man chainsaw?

DP: Yea. And, it was about that time that the Forest Service got their first two-man saw.

DB: I see. What lumber company were you working for at that time?

DP: Drury out in Libby. They...the dozer operator...it all depended on whether they had him building road or building skid trails. If he was skidding, why about all he did was operate the Cat. They had a man on the landing that unhooked the chokers, and they had a man in the woods that set chokers.

DB: Now, what is a choker?

DP: A choker is a piece of cable that's got a bell on one end and a bullet. And the bullet goes under your log and comes in over and hooks into the bell. And it just slides on the cable and sets up tight on the log. And, most generally, at that time, you'd take about two logs to a skid. Lot bigger timber than what they're doing...dealing with now. And your machines never had the power that they've got now.

DB: So, would the Caterpillar be set up higher than the log, or lower than the log...or how would that work?

DP: Your Cat is set up with a winch on the back. And this winch cable comes out, runs through your loops on your chokers. And then he pulls it all in. He tries to get the end of...the logs off the ground, so it cuts down the friction. And, the more he can cut down on the friction the more he can pull. But, the choker setter in the woods, would know about how many he could pull. He'd set that many chokers, and hook on. The man on the landing--all he did was unhook the chokers, and put them up on the back of the Cat, so they wouldn't loosen. And usually they had enough chokers, so that when they were going to the landing, the choker setter in the woods, could be setting up for the next skid. And they just swap. When the dozer got back out, he took the empty chokers send it back in with full ones.

DB: So, there would be basically four people out in the woods--the man who cut down the trees, and cut them to length; and then, the choker setter; and the Cat operator; and then what did they call the man who undid the chokers?

DP: The man on the landing, ah...they just called him the man on the landing, all I know. Ah...he unhooked the chokers and then if they were in smaller timber, he'd cut the timber to length. With tree length skid. Also you'd have your loader operator with the loader, on the landing.

DB: What would he do?

DP: He'd load trucks and stack the timber as it come in.

DB: Would they have to build roads to get the trucks in there, or were most of the roads?

DP: No, they'd have to build roads most of the time. Before, before a lot of dozers were in this country they used jammers--to skid the logs.

DB: What's a jammer?

DP: Jammer's is an old truck that they taken the back part off of 'em and they put...it all depends whether it was a

single drum jammer or double drum...but they put a motor on the back and a clutch system, with a chain drive. And they had two drums with cables on it; one, they called the haulback and one, was the mainline. And then they put a boom on it, and they'd run the line out; they'd anchor the boom to trees; run the line out down to a stump, put a block in. And then they'd run the haulback line down to it, and use a set of tongs to skid with. Most generally they could skid about 500 feet, with it.

DB: Is is something like high lead or something...?

DP: It was a lead up to the high lead, I believe. I don't...high lead was something that come after the jammer.

DB: When you started work, let's say it would be 1944, something like that. Is that when you started working in the woods as a timberman?

DP: I started work for Forest Service in '45.

DB: With the private companies, when did you start with them?

DP: Well, it was during...it was...let's see. I worked '45 in the woods. Winter of '45. And, then I went back to high school. And, I didn't work in the woods again...

(END OF TAPE 12; Side 1)