Henry A. "Hank" Hansen

Interviewed by Jim King
Oak Harbor, Washington
3/2/99

Jim: Hank Hansen and I are looking out at the Bay in Oak Harbor, Washington. We are talking about the waterfowl days in Alaska and about the Aleutian geese. I heard from Forest Lee. He says now they have a few of them going to Japan. He's pretty excited about that.

Hank: I heard they had a migration headed in the that direction. That will probably work out pretty well. Those people over there seem to have a real good wildlife conscious, particularly of rare species that they take an interest in and I think they would take care of birds like this very well.

Jim: Yes, they have a different interest than we do. I don't think they want to hunt Aleutian geese.

Hank: Oh, no, it isn't for hunting purposes at all. It's an aesthetic thing. It's just the beauty of the bird.

Jim: So from that point of view they don't need as many as we do. They don't manage for volume, but they certainly eulogize things like their cranes.

Hank: Yes. Of course, that's an ancient tradition. They go way back. I was reading awhile back in a wildlife bulletin or newsletter from Alaska that they started fox eradication again on some of the other Aleutian Islands to expand the range of the Aleutian Canada goose by cleaning up more islands out there. It will be interesting to see how they take off in instances like that.

Jim: I saw John Martin last fall and he says he is going to retire in three years and when he retires, he wants to be able to say the Aleutians were essentially clear of foxes and he's got a plan to eradicate them from most of the rest of the islands.

Hank: Well, more power to him because we certainly don't need foxes for winter clothing and fur anymore. It goes against the grain and people are fighting it so there should be little opposition to getting rid of foxes in places where they never were to start with. If it's part of the native fauna and has been forever, it's a different thing but if these animals have been introduced there for man's use and purposes, then we shouldn't feel any pangs of remorse about removing them. That's the way I feel about it.

Jim: What I've been telling people is that before things were abandoned there by these fox farmers that introduced them, and it's a matter of putting them out of their misery now, that they are becoming inbred and they've used up all the bird resources that they had initially and the best thing for the foxes is just to end it. We got a little money to help on that from the Exxon Oil spill. That's why I was involved a little bit with it.

Well, you know Hank, Bruce Conant and I, we get together for lunch about once a month and we still talk a lot about the continuity of the waterfowl program that you started and that I maintained and now Bruce is maintaining. It is a 40-year continuity now which is kind of exciting in the annals of the Alaska programs. None of the other flyways has a program to equal that continuity.

Hank: I've often wished that I lived closer to you guys so that we could get together and we could do more in this area of nostalgia but it hasn't been possible. I guess I do take quite a little pride in that too, that we started something back there that was absolutely hopscotch guesswork in a way. We did have goals and we did have some objectives but that is something that truly grew like topsy out of nothing. As far as I can tell it has been worth every minute and every hour that we put into it over the years. In that respect, I can take quite a measure of pride in it but I'm not now doing as much as I should, that is going back to the

beginning and polishing it up. I guess that is why I brought you and Bruce along so you can go ahead and follow through on it.

Jim: You know one of the interesting things to me is, of course, you were relying pretty heavily on a lead pencil and a pad of ruled paper and the adding machine was in your head. It is interesting how the quality of the data from those days still is well enough organized that these guys now, who don't know what a lead pencil is, can manage it in their computers.

Hank: I'll never forget early on, in 1956, when I had to fight a hard tough fight to get dictating equipment and the first one was the old dict-a-belts and they were O.K. for the moment but you try to store them from year to year in a warm room or under not ideal conditions, and that material would fall apart. You would still end up with what you took on the clipboard. I had a friend in Juneau that worked for IBM. He was a salesman for IBM. They came out with a little machine that was a third or fourth the size of the big old Dictaphone that we used to try to stuff into the Pacer in some way or another. He brought that down to the office and he demonstrated it for me and it was just like a piece of magic. It was compact, it was clear. It was a metallic belt that you could keep, store, and it costs, as I recall was a magnificent sum of $75.00. I didn't have money in the budget to get one of them much less the two that we needed, one for each observer. I had to argue like mad with Washington. That was technology they couldn't see so I still don't know, and if I did, I'm not sure I would tell, how I eventually got two of those machines for the field work the following year. But I ended up with two of those machines for $150.00 total. I probably didn't hire a field man that summer. We used those original machines all the years that I was in Alaska and then they were passed along to you. Where they are now, I don't know.

Jim: Well, yes, I used them for 20 years. They were way lighter than the Dictaphone machine but they weighed about nine pounds apiece which is considerably more than cassette recording equipment nowadays. After Bruce Conant came back from Washington, he decided we needed to upgrade and get some lighter equipment. One of the last years I used those IBM machines, I got to Anchorage and one of them wasn't working right. I went over to IBM to their maintenance department and the guy looked at that machine and he called some other guys over and they wanted to look at it. None of them knew how it worked and then somebody said some supervisor up on the top floor used to work on those. So they went up and got some guy who had been promoted to an administrator and he came down and tweaked this thing and got it working for me.

Hank: One of the reasons they didn't want me to buy them was because it was a friend of mine that worked for the company that was selling them. They thought we had a cronyism going on there.

Jim: You mentioned the deterioration of the dict-a-belts but I never threw any of those IBM belts away and you know, the other flyway biologists never save any of their recordings. I think it was Jack Hodges who decided to re-transcribe all those old records which showed observations from both side of the airplane. Using a computer then he could continue to perfect the kind of exercises you were doing to see what the difference between observers was.

Hank: That was another technique that I developed up there in Alaska and it was out of necessity. In no one year did I have the same observer for a whole survey and every year the complement of observers would change. It seemed so obvious to me that if you got two different guys looking out of the airplane for one day and the next day, one of those guys has changed, and you may have eight or ten of that type changes during one survey period, that there is no way you can have a consistency of data. It isn't logical. I came up with the idea of trying to standardize the counts by comparing, and as I have explained, my count against every other individual and don't add anybody else together so at the end of a season, I've got all my counts down one side of the airplane. If I've got two observers or ten observers on the other side, each of those is recorded separately and I gave them all kinds of fancy names. I figured around with the data and there was another concept and the only comment back out of Washington was that "it's a waste of time and money, forget it." I didn't do that because there was nobody close enough to make me give up! Since then, since I have retired, I kept all that information. Like you say, you keep your original data and your tapes and you stick it back in a corner someplace. I didn't know if I would ever use it or have reason to, but it was there and Bruce and Jack Hodges, somehow they found it and brought it up-to-date and they've

made heads and tails out of it. It shows that it is valid. Those differences are not just someone's imagination but they are real. Some of those early things, we did them without any real knowledge of what we were doing or how we were going about it, just some kind of intuitive feel that it had value. What I'm glad now is, we've got young guys like Bruce and Jack that have enough interest in that and the technology and the machinery that they can go ahead and go back and pick that up and do something with it. It makes you feel pretty good to know that all you did back 50 years ago wasn't in vane.

Jim: Well, I think the waterfowl project that you started is a really wonderful example of how good questions can be pursued over time. I had the same feeling that the people at Patuxent who were analyzing all the waterfowl survey data, I didn't dare ask the question, "are we messing up our data by changing our observers." You were the only one that initially was asking that question. That remained on the table until Bruce and Jack really looked at a lot of data and made some strong conclusions that the problem was not severe and nobody else could do that because they didn't save their tapes.

Hank: But the thing that kind of amazed me at the time, and still does, was that it seemed so obvious. These so very basic things seemed so obvious that that is what use to frustrate me that I couldn't get people to understand what I was trying to get at. If you're a big square-headed Norwegian and you just keep hammering at things, maybe you get through sometimes!

Jim: Well you got through to some of the younger people that you hired, including myself. Your message came through.

Hank: You know, there were some compensations, Jim, that more than made up for these frustrations and that was our fieldwork. Our banding program and our production surveys and all of our fieldwork and the crews that we had working with us out in the field put up with one heck of a lot of frustration. We had some wonderful field crews up there.

Jim: Something I always felt, you know you can never get rid of the frustrations, that's part of life, but for some reason there was a level of freedom for biologists in Alaska that was better than for other parts of the country. We could try things.

Hank: Yes, particularly a level of freedom after you got out of the Regional Office! As long as you were shackled there then that's why you were always so eager to get into the field. You didn't mind those 12-14-16 hour days. That's true, there was a tremendous amount of freedom in Alaska that I don't think the field biologists had anyplace else.

Jim: That is kind of disappearing now as they fill the Regional Office with transferees from Washington, D.C.

Hank: One of the things that is discouraging to me is, we got these young guys that are coming in and it seems like if they put in 9 hours a day or 10 hours a day, it would have to be recorded as overtime for which they get paid. That word wasn't even in existence when you and I were in the field. We went out on a Monday morning and came home on a Saturday night and we may have put in 5 hours one day, but then for the next five days, we put in 20 hours a day. There was no such thing as a concept of overtime in our fieldwork. It was a job to be done at whatever time it took.

Jim: Nasty jobs too like camping on Tetlin Lake and suffering through those long evenings by the fire watching the sunset over the Alaska Range.

Hank: Swatting mosquitoes and going up Tetlin River to see if the fish were still biting.

Jim: Telling bad jokes around the campfire; I remember that.

Hank: I remember that too, because I was generally the butt of those bad jokes! I couldn't keep up with the youngsters.

Jim: Those were wonderful summers.

Hank: That was adequate compensation for the extra hours that we put in.

Jim: One of the neat parts of that was you would be off touring your field camps and you would have to spend a certain amount of the summer in the Regional Office. But whenever you would show up in camp, you had a fresh supply of delicious food which you set right to work preparing for us and we had these great dinners with biscuits.

Hank: It didn't take me very long up there in the field to come back to a field camp and know that that was my best self-defense. You guys might have gone a whole week and not cooked a meal if you couldn't open a box and scrounge it some other way. I had to have "food." We did have some good ones!

Jim: I used to be accused of living like a muskrat hunter. I don't know how muskrat hunters lived but we lived pretty crude.

Hank: I remember that one crew we had in Tetlin. We had this young guy and he was above doing camp chores. We all took turns doing dishes such as they were and trying to make the camp livable which was a minimum of effort for everybody. I remember this guy, he hadn't been in camp but a couple of days and the rotation was coming around to where it was his turn to do dishes. He looked at me in total, absolute total disdain and he said, "I don't do dishes; at home we have maids to do that." There is where I decided this guy is going to learn something about camp living. He was a senatorial appointee and he perceived it to be his mission to do nothing but photograph a profile of the head of every waterfowl we caught, banded, and worked on. He had a really expensive camera and his whole summer was to have been that and he wouldn't do anything else but left the rest of us, which we had a minimal-sized crews to start with, to do all the work. When he looked me in the eye and said, "I don't do dishes" I thought this was bad news and he was going to change in a hurry. That's when I informed him that if he doesn't do dishes, he doesn't eat! Before the summer was over I think he actually did the dishes once or twice. I think of all the people that I had in all my crews over the years, I would put him at the bottom of the barrel. The worst of it was when they were senatorial appointees, you accepted them when they sent them out to you and you had no choice but to accept them. You couldn't get rid of them. Some senator in Washington, D.C. whose daddy contributed lots of money to his re-election and you just accepted that. Every summer we got those but most of them were really good. A lot of them were wildlife majors and fisheries majors and they were good but every once in awhile, you would get that apple from the bottom of the barrel.

End of Side A

Start of Side B

Jim: We are continuing with Hank's telling stories about banding camps and he is starting to tell about Chuck Yokum.

Hank: I normally choose not to use people's names in an antidotal fashion. I'm just reluctant to, but after they are long dead and gone, maybe that changes things, and my old friend Chuck Yokum has been dead many years. He was a real nice guy that was somewhat less than adept. I would take him out in an airplane. We would go out to a camp and I could never take my eye off him because I would never know when he would back into a propeller or something as obviously foolish. One time at the Tetlin camp, he and I were there alone and we were going to go back into Fairbanks and as happened frequently, the battery was dead. We got in the airplane to start it and we didn't have enough juice in the battery to turn it over. I had long since learned that if you are going to start a prop airplane on floats, you back it up well onto the ground so that it doesn't run out and away from you. I thought that I'd better prop that airplane myself cause I had done it hundreds of times and I knew how to do it and I couldn't trust Chuck. Even if I demonstrated where to stand and how to do it, I just didn't feel I could trust him to do something as simple as that so I put him in the airplane. I set the throttle, it had to be advanced quite a bit before it would take hold and immediately when it fired, you had to retard the throttle to keep it from taking off. I am standing on the float, behind the prop, and it fired up even quicker and easier than I thought. With the first

compression it roared into action and Chuck is sitting in there and he became totally hypnotized. He was sitting there with his hand on the throttle. Fortunately, I had the window open and I yelled in at him to retard the throttle; pull the throttle back. I don't know what happened to his mind, but instead of pulling the throttle back, he fire-walled it and I'm standing out on the float hanging on to a wing strut and he's inside totally frozen with that thing wide open. Here we are going across Tetlin Lake. I'm on the outside and he's on the inside and finally we got all the way across the lake on the step and about the time I could finally get in through the window myself and retard the throttle, we hauled up into a clump of willows on the other side of the lake. Fortunately, it didn't do any harm. Then I had to cut it to get the airplane turned around because we were nose forward in a bunch of willows and then I finally managed to get it started. I think I got inside. I didn't dare allow him to try to prop it. I'd had him with me a couple other times in the field and I never ever felt at ease with him in an airplane with me. He was not mechanically inclined. He was just one of the problems that I had.

Jim: A couple things that I remember about him was we had that Indian trapper, Albert Thomas. He was a real bushwhacker. He was one of the last of the really competent trappers. He was young then but he had grown up in a trapping camp way up the Black River and he and Yokum got in a story-telling contest. Albert was a good storyteller and so was Yokum. We laughed over those two guys so much. The other funny thing about him was we had to keep all the records when we were turning out banded ducks at a high rate of speed. We thought, gee, this scientific professor here would be just the one to keep good clean records and not make any mistakes. Away we went and he had the clipboard with the records and we were turning out ducks like mad and I looked over him and he was fast asleep, so we had to make other arrangements on that.

Hank: You probably remember one summer when we were headquartered out of our Fish and Wildlife Service cabin at Fort Yukon. We had the only outhouse in the village, I think. Chuck used to go out to the outhouse to write up his field notes. It was the 4th of July, a hot miserable 4th of July up at Fort Yukon. He was sitting in the outhouse, but he had been there half a day and there were about 6-8 other guys that should have had equal access to it but they didn't. So I got a great big cherry bomb firecracker and went out behind the outhouse and dropped it down through a hole underneath him. He came roaring out of there after that thing was shot and he took the door right off its hinges. He landed flat on his face on the privy door out in the back yard.

Jim: He thought somebody had shot at him or something?

Hank: Or something. I think it got his attention.

Jim: It seems to me I remember some funny stories about that outhouse. You got it made prefab in Fairbanks and flown up to us in the field. You had a funny time negotiating how to get that put together for us.

Hank: The peculiar, most difficult thing was justifying the cost of an outhouse in Fairbanks to be built in Fort Yukon. Just another one of those financial peculiarities of the organization. That was a good camp. I think one of the best things about that camp at Fort Yukon was we had an adequate sized cabin there and we could accommodate a larger and more diverse crew out of there than any camp we had. I remember I would send Cal Lensink off doing special studies on lakes and we would have banding crews out of there. We'd have aerial/ground comparison crews working out of there and we had enough room that we could accommodate 6-8-10 people working out of that cabin. Of course, they had to scramble to see who had a bunk. Some of them had to sleep on the floor but we had more space and cooking area but I recall Fort Yukon as a place where we had our biggest and most diverse ground study crews. It worked very, very well.

Jim: Well that was all part of the Rampart Project. It was a really big operation for that organization.

Hank: Yes, Rampart was big. Rampart was the first one after I got to Alaska and probably the only one that we had half way adequate funding. The funding didn't come out of my waterfowl budget. It came

from the Corps of Engineers. We felt we had quite a bit more latitude in what we could do and how to go about doing it because we had a little more financial freedom out of there. That worked out pretty well.

Jim: Yes that was a landmark project in Alaska waterfowl annals.

Hank: It paid off. I always had, maybe I'm wrong, maybe it was a false pride of some kind but I always felt that that waterfowl project up on the Yukon Flats over the years that we worked on that was the thing that tipped the balance away from building of the Dam. I always felt that if we hadn't had that volume and type of information to add to the equation that that Dam could very well have gone and we would have lost everything. When all is finally said and done, the weight of evidence fell on the wildlife and the environment and I always felt deep down that it was that waterfowl project that tipped it.

Jim: Well, it certainly got the attention of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agency administrators who had a strong lobbying effort against that Dam after they got the Alaska information.

Hank: Yes, that's right, but without that information I think it would have probably gone the other way. The information was not only timely but in enough depth that I think they really had to take a good look at it and consider it.

Jim: I always remember the report. I still have mine, it was signed by Harry Reitz, Regional Director for National Marine Fisheries, but the Regional Director for Fish and Wildlife Service didn't have nerve enough to sign it and he got his Deputy or Acting to sign it. That is a good report. I copied some of it the other day for this girl in British Columbia who is looking up our grebe banding records.

You told me one time that while you were at Washington State, several years before you came to Alaska, that you had met Clarence Rhode and he had tried to lure you up North some years before you actually did.

Hank: Yes, right after the war. He had picked a Widgeon up someplace in the south and was ferrying it to Anchorage and he stopped in Portland and Seattle. The Regional Office was in Portland then and he stopped in the Regional Office, the routine business stop. I had just started teaching at Washington State and he talked to somebody in the Regional Office that I had met and he mentioned that I was a WWII pilot and Clarence was looking for pilots and he thought I might be interested in coming up to Alaska. He called me in Pullman from Portland and offered me a job. He said he had an airplane and in another day or two, he was continuing on to Fairbanks through Juneau and he just flat out offered me a job. He said, "can you be ready to go in a couple of days?" Yea, I could have, except that I had just accepted a teaching job. Leonard Wing had left overnight. He was a wildlife instructor and he had left overnight and went back to Michigan State or somewhere back there and it left them with a whole bunch of GI students in wildlife. They were just getting out of the Service and had registered in and they had nobody to teach them. The teacher just walked out one day.

The department head came around to me. I was a senior wild-lifer around at the time. He told me what a horrible bind he was in that he had all these eager young guys ready to go and he didn't have anybody around that could teach them. I was qualified and he asked if I would do it. I was working on my doctorate so I just deferred my doctorate program and signed a one-semester contract to teach wildlife. It was a matter of ethics with me. I had just signed the contract, not more than 2-3 days before to teach this wildlife course and here a guy from Alaska comes along and offers me a job which to my way of thinking was far superior. I would be back in the air in Alaska. I didn't think it was ethically right to renege on this teaching job so I accepted it and carried it to the end of the semester. I'll say this for Clarence, he understood. I explained it to him and he tried to talk me out of it. I said suppose the shoe was on the other foot and you had just hired me a day or two before and somebody came along and I had already accepted a job. Then how would you feel about it if I would abandon somebody down here and jump in an airplane with you and go to Alaska and leave this guy down here sitting absolutely destitute. There was a long silence and I had never met Clarence. We had just had telephone conversations. He says, you know you are right. It wouldn't be the right thing for you to do. Then we got to talking about the job. He asked how long would I be teaching. I told him that I had a contract that runs through the semester and I'll be through with it in June. He said, "alright, I'll tell you what, when you get through in June, I've got a job for you in

Alaska and I want you to come up." That was it. It was simple, cut and dried and a handshake over the telephone.

In the meanwhile, I was developing a family and my wife's people were back in the mid-west and they thought that when I brought her to the State of Washington, I'd brought her to the ends of the earth. They thought they would never see her or their grandkids again and they were very, very discouraging about, of all places to take a family of two tiny children to Alaska. Then I had another choice between career and family. I knew that I would have to live with that family for a long while, so I gave up that chance to come to Alaska in that spring and it wasn't until the winter of 1955 when Pete Nelson came down to a regional technical wildlife committee meeting in Portland. When he came down, by that time, they were looking for a full time waterfowl biologist. I decided I had deferred to my family long enough and I applied for that job and got it. I could have been in Alaska a full 6-7 years earlier than I was if I had just gone ahead and taken the job.

Jim: Talk a little bit about working for and with Clarence Rhode. You know hardly anybody in Alaska remembers Clarence anymore and there's a few of us around that were younger people and we really eulogized him but we didn't work in the office with him and have the close association the way that you did. It is important that he doesn't get forgotten.

Hank: Clarence was a tremendous administrator. I never held him in high regard as a field person. He wasn't a biologist. He wasn't trained as a biologist and, personally, I don't think he had a great deal of understanding or even respect for biologists but he was a good administrator. He seemed to be one of those guys that strikes sparks in you. You either liked him a lot or you could be pretty cool to him and I guess I was in the latter category. He was O.K. He never ever really got in the way but then I never ever felt that I was getting a whole lot of support from him. I liked him in his capacity as an administrator but his area was in law enforcement. Law enforcement came first and foremost above anything. If you were a good law enforcement officer, you could do no wrong in his eyes. Conversely, because of that, every law enforcement officer in the force thought the sun came up and went down on him. He could have done no wrong at all.

Jim: Well that's right. That was me.

Hank: Yes, in those days, you were on that side. You saw it from that one side, that one angle. I was sitting in the office with a few new biologists in the outfit and a few of them in Anchorage and we had an opportunity to watch him at work in this other area. I have often felt, and was convinced, that if Clarence had lived he would have eventually become the Director, which was his goal. He was an ambitious individual and sooner rather than later, he would have been the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C. That was his strong point and yet he didn't understand biology and he was pretty aloof with biologists. I got the feeling that he couldn't sit down one-on-one and be confidential in any way with a biologist. He could with an enforcement officer, but with a biologist, he was always kind of sitting off to one side in a corner; not really leveling in all respects. I may have been wrong but that was my opinion. Here's a guy that offered me a job sight unseen without ever having met me.

End of Side B

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