Lynch Trip with Gillham to North in 1940

June 6, 1980

John Lynch:
The narrator is John Lynch and the date, June 6, 1980.

This Tape 3 is not necessarily for transcription. It is largely for information. Since the deadline for manuscripts for the flyaway biologist book is fast approaching, I thought I'd best get some rough ideas down on manuscripts I had planned to submit. The first manuscript has to do with the trip I made with Charlie Gillham in the summer of 1940 up to the Mackenzie Delta via a rather <unclear> route and also the little matter of getting back to civilization also. However, I do note in Art Hawkins' letter of May 6, 1980, that letter includes excerpts picked up by Milt Reeves from Charlie Gillham's own reports, particularly his 1937 report entitled, "Trip to the Delta of the Mackenzie River, Northwest Territories." In my frank opinion, any writing I might do on the subject of Charlie Gillham wouldn't begin to touch the beautiful job that Charlie Gillham himself did in his 1937 report. His writing is absolutely superb. However, for the record, and again, I repeat, this is not necessarily for transcription, I might throw together some of the points that I would have covered had I prepared a story on that 1940 trip with Charlie. The story would have started, would have been entitled, and this is in quotes, "The Voayages of the Flapjack," that spelling is F-l-a-p-j-a-c-k, Flapjack. By the way, parenthetically, that is the name of the boat that we used in our trip. How the manuscript might have started out as follows with <unclear>, "You seem to be a middling fair botanist, John, perhaps you should come north with me this summer." Another paragraph, "Good, Charlie, at least you think I could be of help.", paragraph. Another paragraph, "If I didn't think you could help, I wouldn't have asked." Charlie Gillham's voice had a certain roughness, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that sort of took the sting out of that. I certainly wanted to go north with this fabulous character, Charlie

Gillham, and I was very, very pleasantly surprised with the fact that he had asked me to go. Not mentioning, Charlie didn't invite many people to go along with him on these trips. I had met Charlie on the Gulf Coast where I was stationed working for the Branch of Research in the Fish and Wildlife Service, then the old Biological Survey, and it happened that my winter schedule and his were such that we had frequent opportunities to work together. It was certainly an education to work in the field with competent outdoorsman like Charlie. I'll stop at this point to check for record.

Continue tape. Once the decision to go north had been agreed upon, it was a long period of preparation. Now, this I could appreciate. I'd spent a bit of time in the outdoors myself and knew the value of being ready for whatever might occur. We got together our gear, clothing, Eider downs, the sleeping bags. Uncle Sam didn't supply his troops photographic equipment in those days, so we had our own like of cameras, and we bought, out of our personal funds, bulk black and white film, AGFA Super <unclear> Supreme and cartridges which we were able to hold in what was called a changing bag. I might observe, the changing bag was the cause of much amused comments later on that summer when one of us had to load film, both hands being stuck in that goddamn bag and the rest of one's body surrounded by blood thirsty mosquitos. One couldn't really do much during that time except grin and bear it, and the grin as we consoled one another was more or less optional. Also Charlie, having take, having taken a liken to some of our goodies, insisted we bring along a 50 pound sack of white hominy grits. He felt this would be a fine thing to introduce into the far north, also made fine camp groceries. And I finally got all my gear together and met Charlie up at, as he called it, his hog ranch at Edwardsville, Illinois, and about that time, Charlie was walking round and round a box which had just arrived, and we opened the box and there was a large bundle of canvas and some, seemed like two by fours and some machine nuts with wing bolts and a bunch of metal ribs, and I asked Charlie, "What in heaven's name is that?" Charlie said, "After many

years of research, this is the kind of boat we need for this summer's work." I said, "Charlie, I'm very anxious to see how this thing works." So we got out the direction book and put the cotton picking thing together. It was really quite a rig. The two by fours, when all bolted together, extended out a distance of 20 feet from bow to stern of this craft, and the ribs were placed in at right angles to the, well I guess you'd call it a keel. Then the canvas was snugged in over the whole thing, which up to that time had looked like the skeleton of a fish but now it was fleshed out with waterproof canvas. There was an inflatable <unclear>, well it was kind of a flotation device, ran clear around the gunnels of this strange looking water craft, and then there was a cover that could be laced in place over the top of the entire boat, and it floated, and it had two openings, sort of like you might find on a kayak and some of the Eskimo types of boats, complete with drawstring. Well, after having assembled this thing, we hauled it down to a creek near Charlie's hog ranch, as he called it, up at Edwardsville, and noted at least it did stay afloat, and Charlie says, "Tentatively we can give this thing a name now that it's been officially launched. It shall henceforth be known as the Flapjack," and I said, "Dr. Gillham, the Flapjack it is, and may I notice for the benefit of the naval architects of the future, this thing appears to have the buoyancy characteristics of a piece of newspaper that is gently allowed to float on the surface of the water." Any wave that might strike this Flapjack didn't break over the obstruction, its movement merely ran right through it. Strangely enough, it seemed to work. The thing was really quite, quite seaworthy, and I can speak as a veteran, I cut my eye teeth on a cat boat in the cold North Atlantic Ocean, and I knew something about boat handling in rough water. So we then dried the Flapjack out, put it carefully back in its box, along with the rest of our gear, shipped the whole works via rail to Seattle, via steamer to Stewart. Of course Charlie and I took the rattlers to Seattle, rolled the steamer along with it to Stewart. Then we took the old narrow gauge railroad to Anchorage, stopping to chase stray moose off the tracks. Once having gotten to Fairbanks, which then was giving serious consideration to installing sidewalks, although

really folks weren't ready for such, such foolishness, not back in those, this was 1940, and anyway, once having pried loose from Fairbanks, we, it was a stage route up to a settlement called Circle City. It was a small village on the banks of the Yukon, and it happened to be right on the Arctic Circle, hence the name. We then reassembled the Flapjack and tried it out on the turbulent Yukon River. The damn thing still floated. After many fond farewells and sad shaking of heads among Charlie's friends, and Charlie seemed to know everybody in that country, we headed down the Yukon. Having ourselves a wonderful time, stopping in the breeding channels to study the nesting geese and other critters until finally we got to the settlement known as Fort Yukon. That is where the turbulence, the Porcupine River meets the Yukon. Charlie's friends, naturally, were gathered at the deeps there at Fort Yukon, and there was a great deal of comment, not much of it complimentary. One guy said, "Charlie, I have seen many things float down this goddamn river, but never in all of my grown days have I ever seen anything like that. What is it?" And Charlie, with his usual aplomb, said, "That is the Flapjack, the very latest thing in flotation for all purposes." I will say this, there was method in this madness because the Flapjack had then already passed many tests in shallow rapids, fast water, deep water, and still at the termination of that use could be knocked down, rolled up in a little package and thrown into an airplane, an old bush, <unclear>, or some other relic and flown to the next place. So after having made amenities there at Fort Yukon and met some very wonderful people, we started up the Porcupine. Now, the Porcupine is quite a river, and we had no business trying to go upstream against that very turbulent torrent of water that poured down from its source, from its meeting with the Old Crow River in the Yukon territories. But we went anyway. Very fortunately, we ran across a traitor who was pushing a barge load of freighting goods up to the village of Old Crow and after a brief conversation and a cup or two of the juice of the grape, we arranged to ship aboard as deck hands. We folded up the Flapjack, loaded it on the barge and so long as the barge was on the way during the day, Charlie and I just watched

the country go by. When they pulled the barge, which by the way was pushed by a <unclear> powered motorboat, it would tie up for the night and Charlie and I would scour the country, having had a good rest during the day, and we really saw the country. At long last, we came to the village of Old Crow, which is located in the Yukon Territory at the junction, at the point where the Old Crow River flows into the Porcupine, and of course we made amenities with the local RCMP, a man, that's the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a Corporal Vane, and like so many of the Mounties, Corporal Vane was one hell of a good, a good bird man, and oh, he made Charlie and I very welcome and arranged it so we could spend our first ten days in the Yukon Territory in the local slammer. Let me hasten to explain. Both Charlie and ourselves, both Charlie and I have always been models of rectitude. Certainly we were not given to the bending of any of the laws. It so happened this jailhouse at Old Crow had just been built and was really the best building in town. In fact, Corporal Vane himself admitted in a moment of weakness that he had given serious thought to moving into the damn place himself. He said, my God, this place has wall to wall floors made of straw. It was quite comfortable, and we spent about the next two weeks probing into this fabulous wetlands of the Old Crow Flats. Found all sorts of things there, such as nesting Canvasbacks and so forth, under the guidance of Corporal Vane. Well, at long last, a bush plane flew in from Aklavik, so we rolled up the Flapjack, put it aboard along with the rest of our gear and headed over the rich range into the Village of Aklavik on Mackenzie Delta, that's the Mississippi of the north. Another period of meeting folks and making the amenities. This amenities bit parenthetically may sound a bit ridiculous. One did not travel in that country all by himself, and one did not, not so long as he was with Charlie Gillham, go into another man's country without first stopping and meeting the man, telling him who you are, and being as nice a guy as he knew how. I also learned that while these folks in the far north were indeed very friendly, always happy to see a new face and have a new voice wander into the local conversations, they sized a man up very quickly. It seemed as though, in their

opinion, they placed a man into one of two categories, a casual visitor to whom they were always very gracious, but that's as far as it went. There was another category. Not many people made that grade, but Charlie Gillham certainly did with everybody he met in the far north. Charlie was invited to go on trips where no one else could even buy it, for a very simple reason. Now, these folks didn't rent out their services back in those days as guides. When they asked someone to come along on a trip, they did so for two reasons. One, they liked the guy. Number two, they have that much confidence in him that they knew should some accident intervene, that their guest could take over and get them both back to safety in a reasonable state of repair. Now, this may sound rather pragmatic, but it's also very practical. In any event, we, after all the amenities had been tended to, we unrolled the Flapjack again, and down the Mackenzie we headed, stopping here, there, and the next place. I might mention, this got us into that country at a time when really the bush planes couldn't have done us much help on the Arctic Coast. They could get us into Aklavik on wheels, but north of there, the ice was breaking to the point where the pilots of the bush planes could not land on skis. There was still too much flow ice to land on floats, and of course wheel landings were out of the question. As the bush pilots back in those days, as they are today, were equipped for all three types of landings. After many vicissitudes, we finally got down to the Arctic Coast where the Snow Geese nest. These are on the outer most islands of the Mackenzie Delta...

This will be Side B of Tape #3, Side B, Tape #3, continuing on the master tape. We ran off of Side A at the time when we were just departing the settlement of the Aklavik headed for the Arctic Coast. Those, our destination was to be the nesting ground of the Snow Goose on the islands of the Mackenzie Delta north of the <unclear>. Check at this time for the record.

The Flapjack, not a very nautical vessel, really, but the more I saw of that strange apparition, the more respect I had for it. It was utterly incredible. We

had aboard that bunch of two by fours and metal ribs and waterproof canvas all of the equipment we needed for an entire summer's work, <unclear>, tents, sleeping bags, food, what was more important, fuel. Now of course being on the river delta, we were fortunate in having firewood brought down from the timberlands into the real tundra country by the might Mackenzie River. Of course it was always damp. Also, we had all of our camera equipment, first aid equipment. We had to do some innovation, however. It was next to impossible to keep glassware of any sort intact whenever a wave, in its typical manner, instead of breaking over our water craft, merely ran through it. You see, the whole boat just, as a fellow said, rise and fall with the, with the swell. We learned some tricks such as, of course part of my job was the collection of invertebrates and all the stomach contents of various animals, and instead of carefully pickling these in glass containers with formalin, I found that an old automobile inner tube was just fine. I cut a V-shaped hole in this inner tube that could be sealed with a piece of adhesive tape. I also had a can of formalin, that's the water solution of formaldehyde gas, and my specimens were first soaked in the metal can of formalin, allowed to drain, and then popped into the inner tube and the flap I had made sealed so as to prevent the escape of the preserving, of the preserving gas. Admittedly, we also had two or three, or maybe seven or eight containers that were made of genuine glass, but this contained, these containers were filled with their fluid far more precious than formalin. Chemically it is known as ethanol, 195 proof alcohol. We figured, and rightly so, that although this ethanol was originally designed to preserve any specimens that we might collect, for some reason or other, it seemed to have a very high rate of evaporation every time we stopped to visit with some of Charlie's friends in the far north, and Lord saves us, Charlie knew everybody in the far north, but that's beside the point. Anyway, we finally made it on out to the tip end of the Mackenzie Delta, went through country where Sandhill Cranes were nesting. We could see where the Snow Geese had waited for the ice to go out of the Beaufort Sea during which time they gouged out great holes in the

beds of the <unclear> along the channels of the Mackenzie, and finally almost within sight of <unclear> Island, we came upon the islands where the Snow Geese were nesting. After some scouting, we located an island high enough to pitch a tent and make camp. It wasn't really very high, and as we found out later, it wasn't quite high enough. Once we had camp set up, then came the business of doing our routine studies of nest success among the Snow Geese, also the Brant, the mostly Black Brant that nested in that country, although we did collect some specimens of the Atlantic Brant that far west, and many other waterfowl, such as the Old Squall, and our observations were not by any means confined to waterfowl. As a matter of fact, in that fascinating country, the whole plant and animal kingdom seemed to be our, of concern to us. I struggled mightily with my plant press, trying to collect specimens of the various types of vegetation in that region and, of course, the various forms of animal life. If they were big enough to eat, of course we ate them. Along those lines, I recall rather vividly we ran a bit short of groceries, and I hope no conservationist, at least none of today's conservationists are going to read this, but we were reduced during one period of very bad weather to shooting birds. We shot yearling, that is to say non-breeding, swans and brant and geese. I might mention that. Most of the birds of that group required 24 month to reach sexual maturity, and we figured since necessity required that some be killed for food, that we kill the birds that had not yet reached breeding age. Yet in another, later on in that trip, when we tried to launch our boat from the tip end at one of the islands and get caught in a storm and get tossed back to where the bottom was ripped out of the Flapjack, things were a bit grim for four days and four nights. We made sure there were two of our party, which includes Charlie, myself, and an Eskimo boy, awake and walking around. We were only inches above thawing permafrost with wet eider downs. We don't know what might have happened to us had we slept over long in the wet eider down on thawing permafrost, but we saw what happened to nesting Snow Geese who tried to keep their eggs warm in that thawing permafrost. They dared not leave their nests for fear that their eggs

might chill. Many saw fit to stay with the eggs and died. However, they were put to good use. Our party didn't have to shoot birds anymore, we merely picked the dead females off the nests and ate them and had the half incubated eggs for dessert. It sounds grim, but the Romans have a saying that covers situations of that nature,<unclear> optimum est, hunger is the finest of seasons. That's a grim country. I suspected this right along, but when you're face to face with it, it's a bit shattering. Well, we completed our work on the actual nesting grounds of the Snow Geese, and Charlie had found that once the young had hatched and were able to leave nests, they then moved to the inner islands of the delta. So we broke camp and went back into the inner islands in hopes of catching a bunch of these birds and banding them, thereby allowing us to track down their wintering grounds. No one was sure at that time whether they wintered along the Pacific Coast or went down to the Gulf Coast, and we also had aboard this incredible Flapjack, quite a bunch of fishnet, which of course could be used for many purposes, and was. It could be used as a barrier or a drive fence, and when we caught the flightless young and their parents, who then were undergoing wing molt and so could not fly, we started a drive, and at one, at first we were catching, just driving these droves of female geese and their young ashore and trying to chase them through the tundra of vegetation. Well, that was not really very productive. We found a place where these geese had been rather making fools of us. They were going down one channel and not coming out the far end of it. So after a little scouting, we found that they were crossing over and coming out the mouth of another channel. So we took our fishnet and made a barrier and a catching chamber on either end and came very close to catching in the neighborhood of about, I'd say, 4,000 of these geese, but actually got only about 45. Our Eskimo boy, Raymond, he happened to be in the wrong position at the wrong time, and that blew that operation. Unfortunately, we had staked as much gas, gasoline, as we dared expend on that operation. We had two outboards, by the way. One was a five horse. That was for the heavy going when we had to go back up the Mackenzie to Aklavik to get back home, and we

had a half horse egg beater for routine missions, and we actually fed gasoline into that little outboard almost with an ink dropper. We learned about the conservation of petroleum very early in the game. Remember, all of the gas that we would have burned that summer was aboard the Flapjack when it left Aklavik. Well, anyway, that pretty well wraps up the, our experiences on the Mackenzie Delta. Of course, it could branch out in many other directions. But eventually we got on back to Aklavik, then we rolled up the Flapjack again, a bush plane picked us up. We had hopes of getting over to Coppermine, but those plans sort of fell through so we made our way down via great slaves and <unclear>, down to Fort Chippewa and there spent about ten very wonderful days on the Athabasca Delta. We tried some banding there, without a great deal of success, and then back to Edmonton for a little bit of respot from those goddamn mosquitos, such a thing as a square meal, and to sleep between sheets. It was quite an experience. That summer taught me many, many things, but far most among them was the high esteem that the folks in the far north had for one flyaway biologist by the name of Charles E. Gillham. I think everybody in the far north knew Charlie, and he knew them. He was accepted, not because he was liberal with his money, because he didn't have any great amount of money, not because he was this or that or the next thing, but because he loved that country just as so many of them did. The thing that still remains uppermost in my mind were some of the folks one would meet in the far north during those years. There were some folks there who had more degrees than you could count, yet they decided they would rather spend their lives out there where the action was, where things were real, and Charlie was cut out of that same bolt of cloth and was welcomed among the folks, regardless of their background. I'll stop at this point for a check on record, check on record.

This will be a final wrap up, wrap on the 1940 story of Charlie Gillham. Charlie wrote a book in the year 1947. It was published by A.S. Barnes and Company, New York, and in that book, Frank Dufrene, who himself was an old veteran of

the far north, especially in Alaska, mentioned that there actually were three Charlie Gillhams. The first Charlie Gillham was pretty much the one I described. As Frank Dufrene puts it, four days after he's left the last rail, give him time to grow a decent stubble on his ready face and Charlie can match any of the old timers in the far north. Yet there's still another Charlie, who, given a shave and a clean shirt, is a country squire and a very gracious man with a lovely family and a fine farm in Illinois, and a part of Charlie that is not generally known, while to some he may appear be a rather crusty individual with the hide of a snapping turtle, he has the soul of a poet, and he has written another book of Eskimo fairy tales, the whole thing is. Now that is quite a guy, and of course there's the other Charlie Gillham, as Frank Dufrene puts it, Charlie #3, and folks who attend the wildlife meetings are familiar with him. He likes to hunt and fish and is a crack shot with a rifle and shotgun and as a crusader and conservationist, and he knows whereof he speaks because he has covered North America, and I do mean covered, from the far north to Central America. Charlie was not the first flyaway biologist by any means. Hopefully he will not be the last. But he has blazed many trails through areas north and south that now are relatively easy going for the flyaway biologists of the present time. One thing Charlie could not tolerate, and that was sham. Really he was tolerant almost to a fault, but one thing that would rouse his ire was for some character who really scarcely knew what he was talking about. You might say one who had all the answers, and we have so many of those folks today, yet didn't really have a very good grasp of the questions. Charlie Gillham is a very complex man, and the trails that he's blazed are followed today by many of his predecessors, many of his colleagues who scarcely have thought of the caliber of the man who first blazed those trails. And this will terminate Side B of Tape #3, terminate, terminate Tape #3, Side B. This will terminate this tape. Narrator, John Lynch.