

# Sig Olson

Oral History Interview

Sig Olson

Juneau, Alaska

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Interview conducted by:

Jim King

Jim: Sig, what we would like to know is how did you happen to go to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service in the first place?

Sig: I was just in the process of graduating with a master's degree from the University of Minnesota and I had my sights set on going to work as a wildlife biologist for the State of Minnesota up in Northern Minnesota where I came from. My dad had done the first research on wolves and one of his students, by the name of Milt Zahn was the State biologist in charge of that area. My goal was to go to work for Milt. However, Dr. Marshall, my advisor, came up to me one day when I was just in the process of finishing up there, and he said to me, "hey, Sig, how would you like to go to Alaska?" I was kind of overwhelmed. I had never even thought about going to Alaska. I had my sights set on Northern Minnesota. He told me to think about it.

I did some thinking about it, went home to talked to my wife and we finally decided that maybe we ought to be halfway serious about this. I talked to Dr. Marshall a little bit more, found out that the man that he was referring was working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Juneau, a former graduate from the University of Minnesota. He was looking for somebody to come up and do some wildlife work for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Jim: Would that have been Pete Nelson?

Sig: Yes. The next thing I knew I was on my way to Juneau, Alaska, to be a wildlife biologist. That is just about as simple as it happened. I imagine I filled out a form or two but I don't recall. It seems to me it was pretty informal. I just showed up there one day and Pete put me to work.

Jim: There were some exceptions for Civil Service employment in Alaska then, I think. We didn't have to take a test or be competitive; just somebody had to say "yes."

Sig: I don't remember any formalities other than just coming here.

Jim: Did you work in Juneau or did you go off to Petersburg?

Sig: I was in Juneau for awhile, just doing a few local things. I can't actually remember what they were, just sort of a familiarization with what was going on with the agency itself, and with the enforcement agents that were in each of the towns in Southeast. I can't remember exactly just how long I was in Juneau, but about two weeks later I was transferred down to Ketchikan. That was the first place that I actually worked. The first thing I did, however, was to go up to the Yukon Delta and conducted waterfowl surveys the first summer.

Jim: That was 1950?

Sig: Yes. \_\_\_\_\_, my wife, didn't come up to Alaska until we were ready to move to Ketchikan. In the meantime, I had a son, Robert, my youngest that I had never seen before. We then were stationed in Ketchikan. We were there for 3-4 years. My main responsibility there was learning about black tailed deer; their range, distribution, hunting pressures, just sort of a broad study. Nobody had done anything to speak of on anything. Anything known at that time was very general. My first efforts were to try to accumulate some information that was a little more positive than just guesswork. That was the primary thing other than the summer waterfowl surveys in the Yukon Delta that first summer.

Jim: Did you do the waterfowl surveys in the Delta for just one summer?

Sig: Yes, just one summer. That was the year that I hired Jack Paniyak and Mathew Peterson. That was a good summer and we learned a lot of things about Alaska and the way of doing things. It was one of the more exciting years that I had had up to that point. I met a lot of people that worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service – Ed Chatelain, Mauri (Maurice) Kelly were in Anchorage at the time. They helped point me in the right direction. I think Ed Chatelain was my supervisor. I didn't see enough of him out there to really know. At any rate, they were a great help in just getting myself established. It was a far cry from anything that I had ever experienced in Minnesota.

Jim: Then you moved to Petersburg?

Sig: Yes, the next step was to move up to Petersburg. I spent several years there doing essentially the same type of work, with a little more detail and a little more "know-how." When I was there, I also had the opportunity to do some wildlife survey work on the Stikine Delta, getting information on snow geese and just general waterfowl use on the Delta, nothing very extensive or in-depth. That was just part of the job. It was just general knowledge, nothing that people didn't know, but very little had been recorded about it. There were a lot of initial surveys made. I learned where things were, where bird concentrations were and where they weren't.

Jim: It was interesting times. There really hadn't been resident biologists in Alaska much before that time, had there?

Sig: No. There were a few – Paul Adams, Ed Chatelain. Paul Adams was on the Yukon Delta before I was. He was doing the same thing that I went up and did. He was banding geese.

Jim: We were just talking about Paul when I was out there and no one could quite remember what his status was. He was living in Marshall in the house that had been a game agent's house. It seemed to turn out that they just had a house and they put somebody in it – the same sort of vague instructions you have been referring to. No one seems to know what happened to Paul.

You had some experiences with Dr. Ray Hawk out there on the Yukon Delta?

Sig: Yes. Apparently, he had gotten permission somewhere along the line to come out and stay at our camp. His specialty was small birds, not necessarily waterfowl but the other type of bird life that existed out there. He notified me that he was on his way out. One day when we came back to camp after our day's work was done, here he was waiting for us. He was a rather large individual, rotund type. Jack Paniyak and his partner, Matthew Peterson, running the outboards, their comment as soon as they saw him was "oh, my, never go fast no more!" They did like to go fast with the two engines on the boat. I will never forget that comment. Ray was a very pleasant person, easy to get along with, not demanding. He stayed with us a couple of weeks.

Jim: What was that story about him wanting to have an Eskimo name?

Sig: It was during one night we were sitting around the fire after work and supper. He wanted a name so Matthew and Jack said that they would come up with a name. I forget if they did it just immediately or if it was a day or two later, but they said, "we have a name for him." It was "Oh-valu-cuff-puk"(????) He was very impressed. He then asked what that meant. When Matthew and Jack stopped laughing, they said "jack-ass." He was a good sport about it! Afterwards, that was his name.

Jim: It is interesting that the slough that you were camped on got named after him and the name has stuck ever since. I gather they still use Fox Slough. It is kind of a landmark of studies areas there along the Kashunuk.

Sig: They had another name for him too, in a sense. It was “the big man that works on little birds.”

Jim: You banded a good many hundreds of geese out there as I recall.

Sig: Yes, I can't remember how many but we did band a lot of birds. Every once in awhile, I am reminded about it because I still have the pliers that I used to open up the bands. I filed little notches on the outside of the pliers so you could get inside the band, spring it open, put on the leg and close it with the pliers. I still have the pliers in the kitchen drawer. I use them all the time. That's been almost 50 years now.

Jim: I have a not quite so old pair of pliers that I used for duck bands that were modified with a file. In 1950, I worked for the National Park Service in McKinley Park. I was going to school in Fairbanks.

Then, you did deer work for all those years and suddenly blasted into the North for caribou work?

Sig: Yes, I got transferred to Anchorage then went up to Fairbanks. That is where we did all the caribou work. We surveyed migration routes, tried to figure out which areas, identified herd areas – all different areas that were used by which caribou. I found out from all these studies, “don't predict on a caribou.” It was more than just flying around in an airplane and camping out in the tundra, etc. Those years many of us who were working for the Fish and Wildlife Service, looking back and reminiscing call it the “little golden years” because although we may have been a biologist or a fisheries person or an enforcement agent, we all worked together and helped each other out. The biologists had enforcement authority and it was a time of cooperation. I remember very little, if any, friction between the various disciplines that were working together. We all had the same goal in mind which was better management of the wildlife resources and the use of the land. It was a time that, in a way, we each sort of made our own rules and things worked. It was one of the best times of my life, not only for what I was doing but the kind of

people that I was working with – Ray Tremblay, Jim King, Ray Woolford, George Warner, Frank Dyson, Joe Meiner.

Jim: I remember we used to have sort of a social club. Mrs. Glacier used to make baked bean dishes. It was our own group and we were all best friends there.

Sig: That again, was the way the entire staff up there worked. There were no strict lines that we had to stick to in particular. You helped out where needed. This worked out because there weren't a lot of us to do a very big job up there. We were learning the country and learning the way things were and learning what the people were doing, how they were reacting to management. It was a time, for me, a tremendous education on broadening our horizons – things that weren't even envisioned when studying to be a biologist.

Jim: There seemed to be a big age separation there. We ranged from the mid-twenties to, Frank was mid-sixties, yet we could all get along together and have a good time and get out and do a job. It was pretty neat.

Sig: Yes, the fact that we could do that and that we trusted one another to do the kind of job that we should do. I know that many times my main job there would be collecting information on the kinds of animals that were being taken, where they were being taken, how many were being taken, but on the other hand, there was also enforcement. I have some interesting memories on enforcement that kind of colored things up once in awhile.

Jim: Like what?

Sig: One day we were up on the Forty-Mile. We had a check-in station up there during the caribou rut and I had to go down to a creek and get some water that we needed. I started off in the little Fish and Wildlife truck to get the water and as I was coming down the road I saw this guy stopped ahead of me. He got out of his car, grabbed his rifle and sure enough there were 2-3 caribou about 150 yards off the road. I pulled up

behind him, opened up the door so he could see the Fish and Wildlife emblem on the door and just as I was getting out, bang! down went a caribou. He was standing right on the edge of the road. There was a set distance that you had to be off the road and he was on the road! I went up to him and said “I’m sorry, but I am going to have to confiscate your caribou and write you up.” I asked him “didn’t you see me?” He said, “yes, but I don’t know, I just couldn’t stop myself!” He was a middle aged fellow, very respectable looking. It turned out that he was a conductor on the Alaska Railroad, one of those kinds that never ever made a mistake in his life but he sure made one there. He just couldn’t help himself.

Another time at a check-in station, a guy came in with a nice caribou and he was almost in tears because the antlers were falling off his caribou. He wanted to know if he could go shoot another one! Those were the kinds of things that lightened up things and kept it interesting.

Jim: What were we looking for that time we went to Nome? We went panning in the golden beaches of Nome. I still have a picture of you doing that.

Sig: As I remember, I didn’t have any particular reason, except you were my only transportation. You had some business to take care of over in Nome. I do remember flying over there. I had never been there. Jim was flying and then he decided he needed a little shut-eye and I took over on my side. We came to a place where there was a fork in the river – one valley went to the right and one valley went to the left and I thought we would go to the right and about that time, Jim opened one eye and said “go left.” I went left and sure enough, we got to Nome. How he knew where we were, I don’t know. We had to land 18 miles out of town and pay a cab driver to take us into town. That was probably one of the biggest taxi bills that Fish and Wildlife ever got. We were on floats and there were no float landings in Nome and that’s why we had to call for a cab and sit there and wait, a 36-mile roundtrip. Every time I listen to the dog races there, I think of our trip out there.

Jim: Then we tried our hand at gold panning there but we weren't very good at that. What was the matter? Maybe we weren't very serious about it. I'm not sure we even knew what to look for. The last few times that I have been over there, there are a few people making money at it on those beaches. They mostly have a little water pump and a little sluice box. I guess we didn't have the right equipment. Those were fun trips.

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--start of side 2, tape #1—

Jim: We were just thinking about what an exciting period that last decade before statehood was for the Fish and Wildlife Service and those of us that were working for FWS. We got a lot of good work done and a lot of interesting experiences and when it came time for the transfer of wildlife responsibilities to the new State, the wildlife was in pretty good shape, wouldn't you say?

Sig: I think that we had done a very good job. We had taken some giant steps in that period of time. A lot of things were "first steps" and sometimes, you had to take baby steps before you took major steps. To be in on the beginning of more formal management was a tremendous opportunity, not only for the Fish and Wildlife Service but for the people who were fortunate enough to be able to be in on it, starting right at the bottom. The Fish and Wildlife Service went from just nearly management, largely law enforcement, to some very general things going on relative to wildlife populations and fishery populations. We began to get more and more definitive along the line and I think that when Statehood became a reality, and we went from a Territory to a State, I think we handed over to the State a resource of wildlife and fisheries that was in pretty good shape.

I can't remember anything that really stands out in my mind that we needed to be ashamed of or any particular item. Given the situation, the facilities that we had to work with and the experience that we could marshal, I think that we did a very good job.



Jim: During that 35-year period or whatever it was, from the time the Alaska Game Law was passed in 1925 until Statehood in 1959, the population of Alaska really increased about 3-4-5 fold. There were a whole lot more people. The thing that always struck me was that those first agents, even though they had no training in wildlife, they stopped some really devastating practices. They stopped the use of poisons to kill foxes and everything else in sight, the use of game animals to feed dog teams, and market hunting in the hills for the markets and restaurants in town. Sheep was a delicacy in Fairbanks. It was kind of a natural transition from getting those kinds of things taken care of to developing a little more sophisticated management with some biological input.

Sig: Let me tell you about one of my favorite stories. It may seem bragging but as it might be expected, some of the things that we came up with, the changes in wildlife management and laws were challenged by people. We had to make some management decisions that hadn't been available because we didn't have the kind of data that we could. One of the big things in Southeast Alaska was you hunted bucks only. The work that I had done out of Petersburg in particular, indicating that winter food supplies were critical, some places were actually over populated and there wasn't enough food to go around. We could control deer numbers by harvesting both bucks and does. That met with a lot of resistance, that of harvesting female deer.

We finally sold it and we all learned to live with it. Years later, I had moved out of Petersburg, been up to Fairbanks and down to Anchorage and back down to Juneau. I went back to Petersburg but it was not on official business. I was visiting friends. I met this old-timer on the street that I hadn't seen for a long time. He greeted me and he said "Sig, I want to tell you something, he said when you first come here and you say that we should shoot the does, we did not like that a bit but now that we know, you were right, you were right." That to me was one of the best rewards I've had in my experiences, this old-timer telling me that the decision was accepted that way was one of the best experiences. He was a Norwegian. We were surrounded by a bunch of stubborn Norwegians with some pretty good opinions on how things ought to be managed. That was quite a challenge.

Jim: You had to convince Earl Omar who was talking to all these old buddies.

Sig: I tried to keep him from being an adversary but he was a factor that you had to deal with.

Jim: I remember some of those discussions in the first Game Commission meetings I went to, whether to shoot does or not. It wasn't something that was easy to sell but over the years, it paid off.

Sig: I think it was very important just getting to know the various people that were up in the Interior, particularly, aside from game management, just knowing who these people were and what they were like. I know that I made a number of trips with the enforcement people. They had the airplanes and they had the pilots and that was the only way that I could get around and getting information on various things that I was interested in up in the Arctic and sub-Arctic country.

Jim: Did you ever participate in helping Dominique Renea(?) measure his beaver skins?

Sig: No, I never did that but I heard about it but I was never privileged to share that responsibility. My memory was staying overnight and the meals that Mrs. Veneti(?) would put on, dressed to the "nines" you felt that you were just in a very special, high class restaurant.

Jim: I thought it was you that was measuring beaver skins and Dominique said "keep track of the measurements then I won't have to measure them and he watched for awhile and he could see John was carefully measuring from the edge and pretty soon, Dominique said, "never mind, I'll measure them myself." He measured them with a yardstick that he always jiggled around quite a bit. He didn't want a biologist measurement.

Sig: You had to learn how these people's minds ran. You just couldn't walk into a village and expect answers and the kind of behavior, or whatever you found back in Fairbanks or Juneau. I remember that first summer walking down the street of Old Chevak and a group of men standing around in a circle there and I wondered what that was all about. I walked by and looked over there and here was an Eskimo lying on the ground bleeding profusely. I asked what had happened and apparently he had attempted suicide but hadn't done a very good job of it. They were just standing around talking as he lay there in a pool of blood. I went over to the store and I told them about it and they just said, "oh, that's just the way they are." Dave Spencer was coming in. The guy was still alive, we picked the Eskimo up and we were able to get him onto a ship, the *Northstar*, and his life was actually saved and he lived to a ripe old age. What I understood later, someone told me about it, that learning things like that showed you how different those people's lives were than our lives were. Values were different and that we could not super-impose our values on top of theirs and expect them to respect what we had to offer or get what we hoped for. It didn't have much to do with wildlife management, just an example of some of the things and experiences you ran into out there as part of the life of these people at that time. Things have changed now, I am sure. That wouldn't happen anymore.

Jim: You see some changes but the old ideas don't change very fast.

Sig: Now there is a whole new generation of people out there. Education is different.

Jim: They all watch television.

Sig: I suspect that management now, I shouldn't say "suspect," I know that the management of the wildlife and fisheries resources is much more sophisticated. Those people who used to be just village people are now coming in as representatives and senators in our State government here. Management is an entirely different picture now than it used to be, I'm sure.

Jim: After Fairbanks, what happened?

Sig: Well, after Fairbanks, I went back to Juneau and there I was acting supervisor of wildlife restoration in charge of Federal Aid and wildlife work in Alaska. This was sort of the beginning of the end. I was responsible for closing out Fish and Wildlife Federal Aid programs and assisting the new Department of Fish and Game in getting their own programs going. Those were interesting times.

Jim: Then you actually went to work for the State Fish and Game?

Sig: Yes, I became their coordinator there for a couple of years.

Jim: So you sort of did a hand off to yourself?

Sig: Better than not having a job!

Jim: You passed the Federal Aid to the State then slipped over to the State to receive it.

Sig: There was certainly a challenge once again. It was like starting all over again but I was much better armed and I did have some experience in Alaska at that time. I will say that the State had some very capable, able people to work with. The State had lots of available expertise. That was a very interesting time to be a part of and get that switch made. After that was when I moved into the U.S. Forest Service.

Jim: I know you were involved with a whole lot of Forest Service programs but the one that I was most familiar with was when we got worried about the bald eagle nests.

Sig: Yes, I can remember that. There were many bald eagles. Hear again, things have changed so much. When I first came up here, bald eagles were shot for bounty. The fish and game agents were excellent shots. I remember Doyle \_\_\_\_\_ and Ozzie

Siber(??) with their 222 Hornets - special rifles - they could pick off a seal or an eagle at incredible distances. That was another big step as far as I was concerned.

Jim: I remember flying you and Fred Robards on some trips on Admiralty and that led to the Cooperative Agreement for the protection of eagle trees that you got set up. You had to go twist the arm of the Regional Forester a little?

Sig: I don't remember what tactics we had to use but I do know that when Fred and I came up with the protected area around eagle trees, there was much howling especially when there were eagle trees every mile down the beach with a big protection area around them. There was no way they would get timber out of there. It was strictly an estimate. We hoped that the buffer zone that we had would work.

Jim: The Agreement has been modified and strengthened some but basically you guys got it going.

Sig: Here again, it was a matter of having to do something first. That was an opportunity in a way and then using what information that we had to the best of our ability and the fact that we could do it inter-agency wise was a satisfying thing to be able to be part of.

Jim: I have the feeling that saved the Forest Service an enormous amount of embarrassment. A few years later they had been caught selling eagle nest trees. It was extremely timely.

Sig: Everything has its humorous side. One time down in Prince of Wales Island, I can't remember the logger in particular but he was a fellow about my age and was a pretty aggressive, active guy. He didn't really like the regulation about how much he had to give, about 660 chain length(??). He was giving me a hard time about it. He said, "why hell, I have been here for 7 years logging. We have a main drag coming down off this hill and another one coming from the other side and our log storage is right here and

right where the two log woods joined is a big tree and in the top of that tree is an eagle nest. It has been in there every single year that I've been here. There is no buffer strip, you got big trucks going – what do you need with all this timber around for?" I told him he had a unique position and that he had a stubborn eagle. He was out to give me a hard time.

Jim: I am pretty sure Fred Robards, in talking about these buffer strips, was also thinking that that would be a little winter deer habitat that was protected as well and it was going to be good for more than just eagle trees.

Sig: Actually, there was a definite effort made to recognize the necessity of preserving these certain places. Deer were known to come to the beaches and needed the timber for cover and needed the area for survival in the wintertime. They went down there, not because they just drifted down there for the fun of it. They went there because that was the only place left for them to exist – no trees, no deer. I remember some people saying "the best deer food comes after the timber is cut and all the bushes grow up." The bushes do provide food but it is no good if they can't get to it. It took some arm-twisting along the way.

Jim: You want to make any comments about Clarence Rhode? People are really not aware of the vitality of that person anymore, although, they are trying to resurrect his name out there at Bethel at the Refuge.

Sig: All I can say about Clarence was I was proud to have known him. He was a great help as far as biologists were concerned. You had to show Clarence what and how and why you were doing something. He just didn't buy something at face value. He was a very intuitive person. His personality, something about him, he was not, to me, he was never somebody that came in from the outside and took over the job as leader as is so often the case now. I felt we had an old Alaskan and he knew what the score was. He was a hell of a pilot.

Jim: He seemed to me to be more of a coach than a boss. He was a team-builder, do you agree?

Sig: Definitely. That was the secret of the golden years that we had. We were coached, we were guided, but he also expected you to do your share, not to just go along on his coat tails. I think he attempted to bring out the best in people. I don't remember, staff members in particular, being very adverse to Clarence. I think he was widely admired by everybody that worked for him.

Jim: Except some of the fisheries guys.

Sig: That may be but I'm speaking from the wildlife side.

Jim: From our group, we thought a lot of him. He was the greatest. It was a great loss – disappearing when he did.

Sig: Well, that was kind of a close one for me. Just before they left, he said "Sig, come on with us." I couldn't go because I had made a commitment to a group that I was going to give a talk. I told the people that I would be there and it had been planned for sometime and I would feel very awkward if I backed out on them. He said, "think it over." I wrestled with my process for awhile and I said "no, I made a promise to those folks and I don't want to let them down." As much as I would have loved to have gone on that trip, I felt I had better do what I said I was going to do. That's the reason that I didn't go with Clarence. I don't know if it was luck or not, I guess it was luck. I often think about that. He was the first one that ever let me land an airplane. I never did learn to fly, never had the time or inclination to do it.

Jim: People always used to say that you were a good flier, you just weren't a good lander.

Sig: Well, he let me land it. I think that if I had decided to be a pilot, I could have been one. He also was the one that we landed in a creek in the wintertime, someplace up by Kotzebue, and why we wanted to land, I can't remember.

--end of side 2, tape #1—

--start of side 1, tape #2 —

Jim: I thought it might be nice to talk a little more about winter flying. It was pretty dramatic in the wintertime up there in the Interior. You were going to tell about the time you and Fredricksen disappeared in the snow bank.

Sig: I look back now and can't figure out how in the world we got that airplane turned around and got back out of there without total disaster but we did. Our salvation was it was so cold and the snow was so light that, it looked bad but there was hardly any resistance in it. It was just powdery. We had enough power to get out of there. I had to get use to this airplane flying. I had not done much except very casual stuff. Tremblay and I always had a good time flying together.

I remember when we were looking for Clarence Rhode, he and I spent a lot of time flying out of Fort Yukon. Tom Wardleigh was running the show and there was an Army major there too. They told us areas that they wanted us to look at. We were going along and all of a sudden we got a big cloud of black smoke and something was definitely wrong with our airplane so we wheeled around and we remembered that there was a little lake that we could get to if the airplane quit entirely. Ray nursed it back and plopped down in this little lake. Wardleigh was flying someplace in the area in a Goose and Ray told him what had happened and Wardleigh said, "I'll get you a replacement."

He eventually showed up and he landed in this little bitsy lake with a Goose and gave it to us and told Ray how to put it in. I can still see that Goose going round and round the lake to get a wake going and finally he roared out of there. That was quite a feat in itself.



At any rate, we got the replacement gasket in the oil engine. The mosquitoes were awful. It was just a survival type thing. We finally got the gasket in, got the plane in the air and headed to Fort Yukon which wasn't that far away. It still wasn't working right but Ray talked again to Wardleigh and Wardleigh told him to just fly up along the river and in case the engine quits, you can land in the river or land in a lagoon or something.

We staggered on back and we got into Fort Yukon and Ray again described what had gone wrong and he said, "oh, you got it in upside down!" Here we had to take that cowl off; I think 184 skews it took. We had to go through this whole thing again. The mosquitoes were just as bad in Fort Yukon as they were at the little lake. We finally got that thing put together. That was an unhappy afternoon. The plane was a standard 180 on floats.

We had a lot of interesting things happen. Joe Meiner and I absolutely destroyed a super cub one day up in the White Mountains. I think you and Chuck Gray came up and found us. It might have been Glenn Orton but now I may be guessing, it was so long ago but any way, we were looking for sheep. We were going to do a sheep survey and for whatever reason, we were going to land on a little strip because we could see and compare what we could see from the ground to what we could see from the air, Lion Peak. Mining prospectors had made this little airstrip out there and we just didn't make it to the strip and it totally tore the airplane up. I have a picture somewhere of it burning up. The irony of it was, that morning, we made sure that we had survival gear with us and I made some crack about "well, let's go out and test our survival gear today," totally in jest. We got everything out of the airplane that was of any value. I remember Smitty was terribly put out about it. It was the last of a certain kind of super cub that they had. That was the only two real, could be bad, things that happened.

Jim: I do remember that. It was George Warner and I who flew up there and we saw you guys waving. We were looking for you because you were over due by a few hours and we knew something was wrong. We must have known where you were because we didn't look around very much. I remember we saw you but we didn't see any airplane.

All the orange, white, and black fabric had burned and there was just a skeleton of a plane there, kind of mixed in with the rocks. We didn't want to land and we went and got Chuck Gray with his super cub and took you both out together. He landed there and went up to the high end of it and we had a downhill run to get off. He figured he could do it. That was quite an experience.

The Army got into the searching thing and they went flying by and we were afraid they were going to have guys parachuting out of that airplane to come down and rescue us or help us. There were big canyons on either side and our thoughts were that those parachutists would come down and then we would have to rescue them. They never did try to do that, however.

There was always the pushing and the shoving. Just because you weren't a pilot, didn't mean that you didn't participate in the management of the airplane!

Jim: Winter flying was a two-person operation, at least.

Sig: When I think of the procedures that you went through, draining the oil, bringing it up to the cabin or wherever you were staying, heating it up and taking it back out, dumping it in again, getting started, taking off the wing covers. It wasn't just a matter of jumping in the airplane and going like you could do in the summertime. Some of the winter operations were pretty demanding in some ways.

I remember landing at a village to refuel. The next morning we were going to take off and we were getting ready to go. We had the gull wing and we went underneath to drain the gas line and all the little Eskimo kids said "OH, it peed, it peed!"

When I look back on the operations, with the exception of Clearance's unfortunate accident, we did a lot of flying under a lot of different tough conditions with remarkably few bad problems.

Jim: That was a unique thing. None of us pilot-agents or pilot-biologists ever got in really serious accidents. There were a few landing accidents. There was one accident where somebody, an ex-military pilot had just checked out and went up in the Brooks Range. He was working for the Arctic Wildlife Refuge with Ave Thayer. He was in a super cub and he had a State biologist with him and somehow he dumped that in and killed them both. That must have been in the early seventies. That was the only fatal accident, other than Clarence Rhode.

Sig: When I think of the flying that we did and the places that we flew and the conditions that we flew in and the fact that Ray Tremblay could never tell where this particular mountain was and I could, West Point, - we could never agree on where West Point was!

Jim: As I recall, West Point was marked on the map somewhere northeast of Fairbanks and the White Mountains and the streams just went in every direction around there. There was really no diagnostic landmarks.

Sig: It was a hard one to tell. I don't remember it being that far up. It seems to me, going by it, we were having our usual argument whether it was West Point or not, and I said "well, what's Big Delta doing out there in the distance?" I think I won that day!

Jim: There was some kind of search going on one day out of Eagle. I was talking to Bill Avery(??) later. He started flying in the 20's. He said he was flying up to Eagle and he got lost somewhere up in the hills. I said, "I bet you were up around West Point" and he said, "yes, it was embarrassing, I have done more flying in this country than anybody else on that search and I was the only one that got lost!"

Sig: Goes to show that we all have our weaknesses. Talking about flying and the versatility that we had in our personnel that were doing it, I never dreamed that George Warner was a pilot until one day – there were two things - we were in the office there in Fairbanks. We had stopped for a cup of coffee and it was a nice morning and we stood

on the front doorstep and were looking south and a B-44 bomber took off, headed west from one of the military airports and George made some remark about that bringing back a lot of memories. I asked him, “how come?” He told me that he used to fly one of those. He had been a pilot on B-17 bombers.

I remember him demonstrating, subsequent to the above, one time a particular maneuver to get into a tight place with a pacer and finally he showed us. It was sort of a learning experience. I think Joe Meiner was there. I can’t imagine you or Tremblay, or Woolford not knowing how to do it but I remember him making that maneuver.

Jim: I was coming back from some place with George. He was flying. That was before I had checked out. We were almost in sight of Fairbanks and all of a sudden he said, “shall we do a loop?” I said, “sure.” I thought he was kidding. He started to climb and he got way up in the air from where we were. I got to thinking about the fire pot in the back and some other stuff. I thought if he jumbles things around and we get hit in the head with that fire pot, it is going to be serious. I reached back and I was hanging on tight to this fire pot. He got up high to gain speed and went up and did an absolutely perfect loop. That fire pot never moved a bit. There were no extra “gees” it was just a perfectly coordinated loop.

I remember you asked if I would take Esther up to Fort Yukon one day. I was going up to seal a beaver in a store. There was a gal up there from Ely. Keith Herrington’s wife. I remember we went out there and you gave her instructions on how the passenger in the airplane on skis had to be prepared to do the pushing. The pilot was unable to turn the airplane in the width of the runway. We went out there, heated up the airplane and jumped in and you had both your boys there who weren’t very big then and I taxied down to the end of the runway and started the turn and didn’t make it. She had to jump out and push on the tail of the airplane. You had her all prepared for that and she didn’t complain. They were a nice couple and we had a nice visit.

Sig: I'll never forget the day that Joe Meiner and I were flying, going out to do some caribou surveys and we were headed for the river. Joe had not gone to the bathroom before we started. He said there was no way he could make it to the river so we rigged up something so he could pee in. He opened up the window and "whis-whis-whis" right back in the airplane! We couldn't get to that river fast enough! We finally landed and got freshened up a bit.

Another thing that we learned about in addition to doing our duties as biologists and enforcement agents was being a part of the communities and the villages, learning what they were like. One thing that I remember at Horsetail was they were having a dance and they invited us to come up to the dance. Ray and I went up there and we were watching. These were Indians. Andy Anderson had brought a man down from Anaktuvuk Pass, an old Eskimo who needed some dental work done. Andy knew the tribal dentist was going to be in Huslia so he brought him down to get some dental work done. The dance is going, a typical village dance, two-step waltz, etc., then they asked the old Eskimo man if he would show them some Eskimo dances and the old guy said, "sure." He told the drummers how to drum and got them started. Then he started out doing his Eskimo dances and they were all just sitting around in chairs and on benches.

You could just feel the tension and that was unusual. Then three older ladies got up, they looked very unsure of themselves as to whether or not they should be doing this or not, but they went out there and they picked up that dancing immediately and they danced with him for I don't know how long. I couldn't help but think that here is the Eskimo dancing and here are the Indians dancing and they are doing exactly the same thing and not missing a beat. I thought, "gee, that culture goes back a long way." I'll always remember that example, just sitting there watching those dancers. That broke the ice. Earlier they were scared to death of that Eskimo that was coming to an Indian village to see the dentist.

Jim: Strange how long that lasted. I don't know if it is still a factor or not.

Sig: In those days, those old feelings and those old superstitions and beliefs existed. I can remember Ray telling me about finding a mitten. A mitten had been found on the river and that was not so strange because people were going up and down the river all the time. The only thing wrong was it was an Eskimo mitten, not an Indian mitten. There were all sorts of speculation about that. They were very concerned with the sensitivity of the situation.

Jim: One year when I was banding ducks in Tetlin, we brought Lloyd Davis, the Eskimo from Selawik to help at Tetlin. That fall we got a letter from the Tetlin Council saying it was alright for us to come back and band ducks at Tetlin but don't bring any more Eskimos.

Sig: I don't know if it was animosity or distrust or just not knowing but it was still fairly strong then.

Jim: I think they use to raid each other back and forth and even steal women. Maybe those three women that got up to dance, just maybe their Mother's had been Eskimos.

--end of side 1, tape #2—

--start of side 2, tape #2—

Sig: You know, biologists, if we weren't pilots such as myself, we had to rely on somebody else in the Service who was a pilot. I remember Ed Chatelain wanted to do a very detailed winter survey of caribou up in the Nelchina. He marshaled all the airplanes that he could marshal from Tok, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. I think there were about a dozen airplanes and we were all assigned a section that we were to fly and count caribou, locate them on maps, etc. We were staying at a little lodge at Gulkana or Taslina. There was a small airstrip there right out in front of the lodge. We flew all one day, got most of the flying done and got everything tallied up that night on what we saw and where.

The next morning we finished up and about noon we were all going to head back to wherever we were to go. The weather had not been improving. I was flying with Harry Pinkham. We were all ready to take off in all directions and Harry was at the lead. We were sitting there and the weather was getting worse and worse. Harry started down the runway, branched off, pulled up in front of the lodge, got out of the airplane. Not a word was said and every single airplane, all of them, came back in right behind Harry and we stayed overnight again.

The next day was a nice day and we all flew home. It just took Harry to make that decision and everyone agreed whole-heartedly. We all stayed an extra night and nobody got hurt. That's where the "seniority" – somebody who really knew what the score was, not that the rest didn't, but there are always those that will follow the "leader." That's just another story that I had in mind of another reason why as many of us survived as did by making the right kinds of decisions.

Jim: That was one of the neat things about flying for the Service. We didn't have the same pressure that commercial pilots have where if you lose a days flying, you lose a days pay or you have angry passengers that are losing money. The pressure to go in bad weather is severe on commercial guys and it wasn't on us. We could wait and perhaps that had something to do the successful record.

Sig: I think you are absolutely right. The good flying record was the basis of the ability of our pilots to make the right decisions in critical situations.

Jim: We had superlative coaching from Theron Smith. He understood flying in Alaska and the airplanes we were using. He could always pin point what you ought to know without being fierce about it. So many FAA check pilots and OAS check pilots, instructors, commercial instructors think that the way to be a good instructor is to be cranky as heck and see if you can badger your student or pilot into making a bad decision or doing something clumsy. Smith was not that way. He would just quietly advise you

of better ways to do things. To me, Smith was the most effective coach that I was around in my career.

Sig: I didn't do a lot of flying with him but I never heard anybody say anything adverse or negative about Smitty. I have another story about when we were looking for Clarence. I was flying with Smitty and we had a brand new, unpainted 180. We had flown and flown and flown and decided to land and take a break. We were in one of those areas where there were a lot of gravel deposits along the river and he found one that he liked and he plunked us down and we bounced and banged along and stopped. We got out and stretched our legs. It was a beautiful day. Theron then said, "now we have to look for a place to take off." I said, "well, can't we take off right where we landed?" He said, "no that was pretty bumpy, I would rather not do that, let's look around."

I went one way and he went the other. I wandered off upstream and found a place that I thought was really pretty good with much smaller rocks and no boulders. I went back to the airplane and Smitty came back and I told him I had found a spot. He told me he had found a spot also – across the river. He said, "we'll just go across the river." I asked, "well, how are we going to get that airplane across the river?" He said, "oh, the river is not that deep." So we started out across this river with this new 180. We had Smitty's little boy with us, Terry. Here I am pushing on one side and Smitty is up there gunning the engine and the spray was flying and the riverbed was rough. I thought we would never get across! That water was cold and I was soaking wet. He made some remark as to that not being so bad after all. What could I say. I admit it was nice and smooth in the area he had picked compared to the area I had picked to take off.

That's the only time I helped push a 180 across a river. He often said that his son, Terry, was the youngest instrument pilot in the country. He was never big enough to sit there behind the wheel and look out of the airplane, he had to go by the instruments. I wouldn't be surprised if Smitty wasn't right.

Jim: Terry is now the check pilot for Alaska Airlines on 737-200's.



Sig: I can remember one day coming back, again flying with Smitty, but this was a long time afterwards. Terry was flying some commercial airplane. We were lumbering along in our Goose and I was asking about Terry and where was he and Smitty said, “oh, he right up there.” Sure enough, he was in a small miniature 737. I put the headphones on and Terry said, “want to race, dad?” I had heard that Terry had turned into a good pilot. Do you know Doug Wahto? I remember him as just a little kid growing up down the street from us when we lived in Douglas. Here he is one of the top jet pilots. He was instrumental in getting the GPS landing system going. Yet he is up there in the ski area almost every weekend with his kids. They are all little racers. He is up there working on the racecourses, keeping records, just being another person. It is kind of nice.

Jim: There are some other characters in Southeast that you have some memories of like Hosey (Hosea') Sarber and Lee Ellis.

Sig: I was able to work with those guys. Hosey and Doyle Sisney(??) were two agents there in Petersburg. Hosey was very much respected even though he was kind of a bull dog type of person. What he said, went. He was very knowledgeable about the country. Doyle was his very capable assistant. Hosey was a gun nut, he had rifles that he could pick flies off the wall with at 300 yards. Those were the days when eagles were bad, eating on salmon and seals were likewise, if not worse. I should have probably thrown up my hands in despair, going into that situation. I was new to Alaska. I really didn't know and these guys had been here for years. They were fine people to work with and they were experts at what they did.

Jim: They never missed a chance to shoot an eagle or a seal?

Sig: Well, they used some discretion. If it was possible for them to shoot one, they would. Shooting at a seal head out there any where from 200-300 yards and it bobbing around and you seldom ever miss, that tells you what kind of shooters they were. They always retrieved the seals and skinned them.

Jim: Their primary mission was wolf hunting, wasn't it?

Sig: There weren't that many wolves around. They had to trap and snare most of the wolves. I don't remember much of that going on. They were putting out poison stations. I don't think they were using the gas guns yet. I was pretty ignorant when I went there because I was the little boy on the block and not really in a position to tell old timers what to do and what not to do. I really didn't know what the full picture was. I look back on it now and throw my hands up and wonder how I ever tolerated or lived with that situation. I grew up in a town where wolves were bad. The game wardens up in Northern Minnesota, that was their job to poison, trap, and snare wolves because of their affect on the deer populations. My dad did the first studies on wolf distributions, home ranges, etc. He did a lot of his traveling and picked up a lot of his information traveling with the game wardens. At that point I guess I was pretty wet behind the ears.

Jim: Maybe they were game agents and doing that on the side while doing law enforcement.

Sig: They were working for Kelly. That would predator control. So was Lee Ellis. We did have enforcement authority.

Jim: I know that Sarber(?) worked with a biologist (can't remember his name) shooting eagles and they got several hundred eagles food habit study which is probably a study that won't be duplicated in the future.

Sig: Not with all the serious revolution, governmental policies. I can't imagine any way, shape or form in this day in age. That, again, shows you the infancy in some respects that wildlife management was experiencing in those days. There were just a lot of things that maybe we should have known but didn't know, or didn't know enough about them to be able to make any drastic changes. When you walked into someone else's back yard and start telling them what to do, that didn't go over very good.

Jim: Well, there was a lot of public support for predator control.

Sig: People didn't throw up their hands like they do today. The attitude has changed 100 percent now. Everyone thought they were doing right. There didn't seem to be any shortage of seals or eagles. It wasn't as though they killed them all off.

Jim: How about Lee Ellis. You did some traveling with him?

Sig: Yes, Lee was one of the nicest persons I ever met. He was calm and very knowledgeable about the country and in what he was doing. He was a very quiet, unassuming person; easy to know, easy to be with and yet you knew you had the top of the line expert as far as Southeast Alaska and how to get along. It was a real privilege to be out with him anytime. It was always a learning process. You would find out things that were going on. I feel real fortunate in having been able to know him and work with him in a sense.

The informality that existed in those days, you don't see that much any more. It existed then due to the fact that we hadn't been in existence long enough as biologists or even enforcement agents to have the background, the depth of knowledge, or public opinions. The public now is much more educated than we were in those days. There was a lot of learning going on on several different fronts during those days and that was part of the excitement of having the opportunity to be working at that time.

Actually, during the early days of wildlife and fisheries management in Alaska, pre-statehood time, you don't have to go back very far from the time that we came up in the 50's – it was only 50 years earlier that they discovered gold. Another 50 years have passed since we first arrived in Alaska so it gives you some perspective.

Jim: In that first 50 years, there was a lot of damage to wildlife and a lot of wildlife stocks were really diminished due to the lack of any control. Everybody did whatever they wanted, shooting beaver in the summer, etc.

Sig: We just didn't have enough experience as a state or territory at that point as a public or as a management agency to know what we really ought to be doing. I think it didn't take long for us to find out what we were doing wrong and what we were doing right. The fact is we still got some of the best of everything. We must have done something right. We made our mistakes but we also made progress and set the stage for what we have today. You think of the use now compared to what the use was then and we still have good fishing and hunting. We are doing a better job with it than we did before.

Jim: There has been a six-fold increase at least since the early 50's. There were about 100,000 people in Alaska then and now we are somewhere around 600,000. They are clustering in Anchorage. I heard a politician on the news just this morning griping about the fuel supplement they give people in the bush so they aren't paying so much for fuel and he said, "well, if they don't want to pay a lot for fuel, they could come to Anchorage." I think maybe you could turn that around and say if Anchorage doesn't want to help support the bush, maybe they should move to Seattle! Interesting times.

Sig: I guess that's why when I retired we decided we had better go back to Minnesota where we came from. We spent time there looking at property, etc., and it dawned on us that we were in the wrong place! We were both just trying to be brave about it or something, anyhow, I agreed with my wife that we were in the wrong place but what were we going to do? We had told our families that we were moving back and they were there and we weren't sure how we were going to handle this. This was an early morning discussion before the rest of the family had gotten up. We then told them that we had made a decision and they were curious as to what we were talking about. We told them that we were going back to Alaska! We waited for the "storm" and the storm came with gales of laughter. Finally when the laughing stopped, they said they wondered when the

two of us were going to come to our senses. They knew all along that we were in the wrong place. They were just waiting for us to find out for ourselves. So we just cancelled any ideas of moving back to Northern Minnesota and we never regretted it.

Jim: I remember you went through that once before when the Forest Service had you transferred to Montana and we had such a good going-away party for you that you decided not to go!

Sig: That's right. Howard Johnson was the Regional Forester. Holy smokes, I had to go and tell him that I had changed my mind. He laughed and he told me that I had made the right decision. I didn't get any static over it at all from anyone. I got a little ribbing about the fine party that was thrown for me.

Jim: Looks like this tape is about to end. It has been fun doing this reminiscing.

--end of side 2, tape #2--

--end of interview--

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