Oral History Transcription

Anna Knapp: So, it’s May 25th at 1:00pm. I’m Anna Knapp and we have James Bigler and Tiffany Walton and we’re going to be interviewing Orville Bach. Can you say your name and spell it for me for our recording?

Orville Bach: It’s Orville Bach. O-r-v-i-l-l-e last name Bach B-a-c-h, just like the musician.

Anna Knapp: So can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you ended up here in Montana?

Orville Bach: Sure. Uh my sister in 1959, I grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, went to Auburn University. My sister was at Auburn and in 1959 she came out here all by herself to work the summer in Yellowstone National Park and she’s seven years older than me. And so she made this scrapbook. But by the time I was a senior at Auburn, I was majoring in business. I came across her scrapbook and I thought wow that’d be a great adventure. So in 1968, I came to Yellowstone to work at Canyon Village, with the old, what was then the Yellowstone Park Company. And I came back in 1969, then I went into the air force stationed up in Great Falls, Montana for four years. Oh by the way the summer of 1970, worked at Glacier, and then I was in the air force for four years. And uh during that time did a lot of hiking in Yellowstone that’s when I wrote the first trail guide, *Hiking Yellowstone Backcountry,* which was published by Sierra Club books. Then when I got out of the air force I went to uh back to graduate school at Auburn to major in economics. By now I knew that I wanted to work either permanent or part time for the park service. So even though I majored in economics they have a real good school of forestry and wildlife. So I took a lot of electives so I would be qualified. Took a lot of Ag. Economics too, resource economics. So um took a job teaching economics at Walter State Community College in 1976, that’s in East Tennessee about 40 mi from the Smokies. And then I started working actually in 1974 as a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone. And I’ve done that for 43 years, so I’m not a permanent, but I have you know been here a long time, and had a wonderful career, still do it. And uh and I retired from teaching, kinda semi-retired, I went into teaching online. But anyway in 2006, 10 years ago, we moved to uh Bozeman and since then I uh I taught online for about another 5 years. But since then I have continued to work for the Park Service but now I get to work in the winter, spring, fall, not just summer. So that’s how it all happened.

Anna Knapp: Which is your favorite season to work as a park ranger?

Orville Bach: You know it’s kinda funny you asked that because when I worked just in the summer everybody always told me winter was the best season and I always kinda scoffed at that. Uh and all seasons are great, they really are, there’s not a bad season. But having worked 10 consecutive winters that’s my favorite. (Laughs) You have to ski now if you don’t ski you would not enjoy spending a lot of time in Yellowstone. But it’s just a magical other worldly place in the winter.

Anna Knapp: You mentioned that you wrote this “the first trail guide to the parks backcountry”, can you tell us about that and how

Orville Bach: Sure.

Anna Knapp: you kind of got to writing it?

Orville Bach: You know when I worked for the concession in 1968 and ‘69, I took a big interest in the waterfalls, and in fact we actually discovered some waterfalls, or I shouldn’t say we discovered, we documented some waterfalls that no one knew existed. So I decided to write a guide to the parks waterfalls, well that didn’t really go anywhere, but somehow through that, Sierra Club Books found out about that and they were wanting somebody to write a trail guide for Yellowstone because at the time, all that was available was a pamphlet that kind of described the different regions of Yellowstone’s backcountry. So it worked out pretty good because then that’s when I was stationed at Malms Malmstrom Air Force Base in great falls, so I came down here, did a lot of backpacking, and that came out at 1973 and umm, so yeah that’s how that came about.

Anna Knapp: Do you have a section of the park that’s like your favorite place to hike?

Orville Bach: There again, you can’t go wrong when you go out in the Yellowstone backcountry, I would say the two wildest areas are the Thorofare, you may have heard or read. If you go all the way down to the southeastern corner of Yellowstone, National Geographic found that that’s the the farthest away from any road you can get, its over 30 miles, which didn’t seem that far really, but uhh so the Thorofare and also the Mira Plateau, which is real big area, those are the two wildest, but like I say, all of the backcountry is really great, very diverse.

Anna Knapp: Mhmm….Do you see a lot of animals when you are out there hiking, we’ve heard a lot about the issue with wolves out here, have you ever encountered them while you have been hiking or out around the park?

Orville Bach: I really have, I had an incredible encounter with wolves, I should back up a little bit, I have written two books, you know, I’m a storyteller, I love to tell stories, that’s what I love being an interpretive park ranger. So I wrote one book, came out about 10 years ago called “Tracking the Spirit of Yellowstone” and then I just came out with another one called “Reflections from Yellowstone and beyond.” And that it’s basically stories of incredible adventures and misadventures I’ve had and plus what it’s like to work in the park, but one of the stories was umm, I guess about 8 years ago I was hiking by myself and it was in the fall and of course I’m real alert for Grizzly bear and I came out into meadow and so I kind of put my guard down because you could see everywhere, no bears and I was going to a backcountry patrol cabin, which I could see maybe 300 yards in the distance and umm, it had been a wet summer so the grass was maybe knee deep in that meadow or a little taller. So I’m walking along and all of the sudden from here to that 25 feet, or maybe 25 yards away, up stands a big black wolf and then another one stands up and another one, finally seven, I’m totally surrounded (semi surrounded) by a pack of wolves and you know the hair is standing up on the rough of my neck, just so big, you know but I wanna say that not one of those wolves growled, they didn’t bear their teeth, they didn’t have the hair on their neck didn’t get up, did on mine but not theirs (everyone laughs) and all they did was kind of look at me and then trot off. It’s like uh they were sleeping, they were in a day bed. So that kind of showed me that sometime you know we paint these ferocious, potentially ferocious animals like wolves and bears as being so aggressive, but you know they’re just out there thing and most of the time they don’t want to have anything to do with us, but that was uhh, that was quite an experience (he laughs).

Anna Knapp: You were working here when they did the initial repopulation correct?

Orville Bach: I was

Anna Knapp: Was that a big deal around here? We’ve heard a lot about the controversy of people not wanting them to be reintroduced to the park

Orville Bach: Very, this is a very, it still is, it’s just a very emotional thing, uhh, uhh, you know, some of these ranchers that go back generations, uhh, you know their great grandparents eradicated these predators because uhh, they, they can be a problem umm, to domestic livestock and so the idea of bringing this back to this region was uhh, it was very uhh, very controversial. Frankly, I never thought I would see it happen in my lifetime and it’s kind of odd that uhh William Pen Maht, he had been the director of State parks in California for president Reagan and when Reagan became president, William Pen Maht came to Yellowstone and he was in favor of wolves being reintroduced, cause you know it was a native animal, it didn’t go away from Yellowstone on its own, it was uhh, killed off and so here was a keystone predator that was missing from the ecosystem, the only one that was missing and that is why they called it the missing link. So William Pen Maht was in favor of it and then when uhh President Bill Clinton came into office it became uhh the momentum really picked up and uhh, yeah it happened and you know most of America was in favor of it, uhh they still are and and, you still have a lot of strong feelings. For one thing you know a lot of people in Montana for example  hunt Elk and just the idea that you’ve got a predator that also feeds on the elk is uhh, you know they’d rather harvest the elk than wolves, but yeah it’s a controversial, always will be.

Anna Knapp: Our group here is more specifically studying trout in the area and we’ve heard a lot about Lake Trout vs. Cutthroat trout and in general the idea that there are so many other species kind of blocking out the native Cutthroat Throat trout to the area, do you know anything about that?

Orville Bach: Yeah, you know having been here forty-three years people often ask me what’s the best thing that’s happened and what’s the worst thing that’s happened and the two worst things I’ve seen happen, uhh one is the Lake Trout cause uhh, the Cutthroat used to be so, you know it’s a native fish to Yellowstone and used to be so common placed, I mean they were all over the Yellowstone Lake, the tributaries, Slew Creek, umm Pelican Creek, and the Lake Trout of course was not a native fish, it was introduced and you know Lewis Lake, a big lake was only 8 miles away from Yellowstone Lake and I always feared that one day that was going to happen, somebody catch Lake Trout out of Lewis Lake and drive up to Yellowstone Lake and put him in and I think the first one was discovered in 1994, which means it was probably done sometime in the 80’s, but it just devastated the Cutthroat Trout population cause you know the Cutthroat is uh stays in shallow water, the Lake Trout goes down deep, they don’t spawn in the tributaries so it was a tremendous impact on the ecosystem, to bears, you know uhh otters, osprey, uhh and I know there’s been a lot of work trying to net and remove Lake Trout and progress has been made, but you know they’ll never get rid of it, so that’s one of the two worst things I’ve seen happen, that and the uhh loss of the whitebark pine in the high country. You know I can remember when the high country was just all lush and green and now 90% of the high country forest is either burned or dead because it has warmed up so much, basically.

Anna Knapp: We head this morning, we talked to some guys who work in a fish shop in Gardiner and they were talking to us about a catch/kill policy where people if they catch a Lake Trout they are required to kill it.

Orville Bach: That’s right.

Anna Knapp: Is that common around here? Has it been around for a while? Do you know?

Orville Bach: Well ever since they discovered the Lake Trout that was the policy. You know if you catch a Lake Trout you’re not allowed to put him back, you, you can keep him and eat him, or uhh kill it and puncture the bladder and let it sink, let the nutrients stay in the lake and let it sink to the bottom. But yeah that's, cause it does a lot of damage, I think they can eat 50 Cutthroat in a year, one Lake Trout.

Anna Knapp: Do you know about any other kind of species that are affecting the, Cutthroat, Cutthroat Trout?

Orville Bach: Well of course uhh a big part of Yellowstone was originally berin, you know Firehole River, Madison River, all of that area, Sheshawn Lake, Lewis Lake had no fish and so they were stocked with Brown Trout, which is from Germany, uhh Brook Trout as northeast United States, it’s not a native trout so Brown, Brook, Rainbow are not a native fish, so uhh all of those have competed with the Cutthroat and uhh we have a really good fisheries, uhh, division in Yellowstone that tries their best to preserve the, Cut, native Cutthroat Trout. But it’s mostly catch and release for Cutthroat and you can remove some Brown and, well Brook Trout is especially liberal, if you catch Brook trout mostly in the northern end of the park, I think you can keep up to 5, but uhh, so anyway a lot of mistakes were made in the past, there should have never been, they should have never introduced species that were not native to the area.

Anna Knapp: We, when we were staying in Jackson in Wyoming, we visited a trout hatchery that umm, they bred Cutthroat Trout for the Snake River and the guy gave us our tour was talking to us about how their funding was estimated to be cut by 12% in the next year, have you guys heard stuff about that for Yellowstone as well?

Orville Bach: Well, being a seasonal you know I’m not privy to much discussion about budgetary items but uhh that seems to be the scuttlebutt going around right now as a lot of proposed budget cuts to the department of interior, park service, and of course visitation is going that way and funding is not keeping up, so it’s a problem.

Anna Knapp: How will that affect kinda like how the park runs if you lose a lot of funding in the next year or two?

Orville Bach: Well, another thing I’ve really observed. Uh, I dunno when y’all came into the park, I was down at Old Faithful last weekend for the Bob Barbie Memorial Service. Ya know he was really outstanding superintendent we had back in the ‘80’s and early ‘90’s. And I just couldn’t believe how crowded the park was uh and I looked at the crowd, the congestion, and I thought used to, wasn’t that many years ago, took til mid-summer to get that crowded. So it ya know Yellowstone’s carrying capacity is really being stretched. And so you really need patrol rangers, ya know you need law enforcement rangers, you need uh interpretive rangers, you need people in uniform out to protect the resource and also provide safety. And uh obviously as visitation goes up you can’t just keep the same level of staffing and without expecting some serious uh consequences.

Anna Knapp: You mentioned that you’re a storyteller, do you have any cool like stories or adventures or anything about Yellowstone that you just want to share?

Orville Bach: I have two whole books (Anna Knapp laughs) three hundred, last one was three hundred and fifty pages so we could be here for hours. It’d be hard to pick out one story ya know it really would, I could tell you a bunch.

Anna Knapp: You don’t have any favorites that’s like your go to story?

Orville Bach: I guess the two that come up the most. Uh, I’ve probably spent gosh 500 nights in the backcountry, I’ve hiked all the trails, many off trail trips, and I’ve only had one close call with a grizzly bear. I’ve seen a lot of grizzly bears and like they say if you follow precautions like hike with at least say three or four other people, and you know make noise, don’t leave food around, you know odds are you’re just not gonna have a problem. But I did have a really close call with a grizzly bear uh it was in September, I was hiking with one other friend, and we were uh going over Fond Pass which is up in the North uh West corner of Yellowstone. Very windy day, the wind was in our uh uh face, so in other words the grizzly couldn’t smell us coming. And, and we were hiking in a meadow which entered these little islands of trees and we walked into the trees and made a ninety degree turn and right at the turn was a grizzly cub. And the cub let out a loud wail and I knew immediately boy we were in trouble cause its momma gotta be close by. And ya know there’s an old joke that goes around that you don’t have to outrun the bear you just have to outrun your friend. In my case that wasn’t a joke because my friend was just gone he was running, this was quite a few years ago back when we used to recommend climbing a tree, we don’t recommend that anymore but there was no such thing as bear spray back when this happened. Anyway my friend took off so without even thinking I just threw off my backpack and started running too but I forgot to unfasten my waist belt. So here I had this forty pound backpack flapping behind me, my friend was already up a tree and he said I looked like one of those Russian dancers ya know when they (Anna Knapp laughs) get almost on their rear end with their feet. So I fell down on my knees to unfasten my waist belt and as I was doing so I looked around over my shoulder and here comes momma. She was in a full charge you know her teeth were bared, the hair was standing up on the rough of her neck, her eyes just looked she just looked mad she was coming right at me. And I remember what I said, I said oh God I’m dead. Well I jumped up and immediately I, I focused in on a tree I was gonna try to climb so I’m flying towards this tree, now I’m off trail. And I run right into a a log and just (clap) did a face plant and in the split second I was on my face I remember thinking why isn’t this bear on top of me because I know I’m not outrunning it. So anyway I get up and get to the tree and go flying up the tree and you know rip up my chest with all the limbs and I looked down and I don’t see anything. So I dunno what happened, I think the thing that saved was the cub instead of going past me went back up the trail so I was not between the mother and the cub. And I think she must have just given me a real good love charge (James Bigler laughs). And uh I used to tell this story at my evening programs at the campground about how this bear watched this poor thing struggle with a backpack then fall flat on his face and think well, whatever this poor thing is it’s no threat to me or my cub. (Tiffany Walton laughs) I told that every year cause I was trying to warn you know tell people about precautions bear precautions. And one night this lady came up and she said you know I was here sixteen years ago and that same thing happened to another ranger because we were at this same camp, campground amphitheater and the ranger told us that same story. And that’s when I quit telling it, I thought maybe it’s time to quit telling that story (everyone laughs). So that’s usually my go to story, the other one is uh you know I have a good friend named Jim Hurran, he lives here in Livingston. He, he was a backcountry ranger and now he distributes books in the park. So when I came out with my first stories book we were sitting in a cafe here in Livingston, and I was telling him about how I had come across a wolf way back in 1973, I did a 18 day ski trip. This was back before there were any wolves in Yellowstone, there weren’t supposed to be any wolves. But I saw a wolf you know it was probably just one single individual that maybe just wandered down from Canada I don’t know. But anyway nobody believed that I’d seen a wolf. And Jim says well I know what it feels like to see something and people don’t believe you. I said what do you mean and he says I’m not gonna tell you. And I said what do you mean you’re not gonna tell me, this story is in a my new book, I said course I’ll believe you Jim you’re a backcountry ranger. He’s hiked the continental divide trail, he’s hiked the Pacific Crest trail, I said you’re the real deal of course I’m gonna believe you. He said no you won’t and I said don’t be silly what did you see, he said Bigfoot. And so I about choked on my coffee, I said Bigfoot, he said see I told you you wouldn’t believe me. So then he goes about he tells me he’s climbing up Electric Peak in the northern part of the park and he sees this big shaggy creature walking along with its arms waving. Well naturally I’m pretty skeptical. So anyway fast forward about three years later. My friends that I do a lot of hiking with we were down in the Thorofare area and and we were camped along this strain that had a lot of vegetation and we, and and the people I go with they’ve been here forty years or more. They, they spend the whole summers, they are volunteers but anyway none of us had ever heard these sounds coming out of these bushes and it sounded like, almost a Tarzan yell. Who it was just a half animal, half human, I mean it was just unnerving. So we don’t know what that was. Then it happened the next morning. So anyway, later on that summer we have a cookout every year down near Old Faithful and everybody started telling stories and it was surprising how many people had stories about Bigfoot. In fact, there is a legendary backcountry ranger by the name of Bob Jackson, who if you Google him, he’s done interviews recently about his Bigfoot experiences. He heard the same sounds where uh, we heard them. This has been going on for decades, I guess some trail crew sometimes left the area, they were so scared at the sounds they heard. He saw Bigfoot the same place that my friend, Jim Hurran saw it up on Electric Peak. So I don’t know. I I'm skeptical but.

Anna Knapp: You haven’t gone looking for it?

Orville Bach: I haven’t seen any, any evidence but anyways it makes a good story. (Everyone laughs) I guess those are the first two that come to mind.

Anna Knapp: Do you want to ask any other.

Orville Bach: But there are many others.

James Bigler: I don’t think I have any questions. Do you have any questions?

Anna Knapp: I don’t think so. Unless you have anything else you want to share for fun?

Orville Bach: Well, the question I get most of the time, having been here for so long is what’s changed for the better? What’s changed for the worst? And uh, to me there has been a lot of good changes, you know the road system use to go right through the geyser basins like Old Faithful. It use to be a main highway right through Old Faithful, North Geyser Basin. So I think the park has done a fabulous job getting those areas, the roads out of those areas and protecting them. Uh, getting wolves back in the ecosystem, the grizzly bear recovered and is doing well. Uh, so I guess the, the negatives uh, would be the two things that I mentioned. The uh, uh Cutthroat, loss of the, decline of the Cutthroat Trout population and the impact that has had on the ecosystem. The uh, whitebark pine loss cause most of this warming has occurred while I’ve been here. I’ve seen just an incredible change the growing season, the snow doesn’t stay on the ground as nearly long as it use to, and so this has allowed the insects to get higher in the forest and so that attributes, contributes to the problem we have with the white bark pine. And, of course, now the overcrowding. You know, I don’t know the answer is. Some, something is going to have to be done to address that. So that’s kind of but it’s it’s uh still a tremendous ecosystem, not just Yellowstone National Park that’s two point two million, ations, acres. You got from Bozeman to all the way to Jackson and beyond. There’s a twenty million acre ecosystem and now a days, of course, I am very concerned about the direction our political leaders are going. I don’t understand it, you know.  And a big part of my last book was about that. You use to protecting wild lands and clean air and clean water was kind of a bipartisan thing that everybody wanted to do. So I don’t understand so many politicians almost declaring war on wild areas and clean air and clean water.

Anna Knapp: Do you think that there is a chance that Yellowstone could ever get parts of it shut down due to the way the political situation is?

Orville Bach: I think it could get shut down due to funding. That’s actually happened before. If the funding gets so low, the superintendent sometimes has to step in and start closing campgrounds and shortening the season, things like that. But you know this was the first national park in the world. It, I guess the things that I think about a lot and, of course, I am a big student of Theodore Roosevelt, is uh he recognized that there are wealthy people and corporations that want to profit from public lands and so he was very instrumental in setting up our national forest and the Antiquities Act, which allowed us to create national monuments. And I don’t think most people realized that most of our national parks started as a national monument. And now we have uh, administration that’s trying to undo twenty-seven national monuments, created over the last few decades. And you know, when your population is going this way and your visitation is going this way, that doesn’t seem fair to our children and grandchildren because what if, what if our forefathers had done the same thing? You know, we wouldn’t have Grand Teton, Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce Canyon. So this would be a concern that I have. That’s about it.

Anna Knapp: Have you traveled to all of those other national parks kind of in this area?

Orville Bach: I’ve, Yeah. Sure have.

Anna Knapp: But you like Yellowstone the best?

Orville Bach: Yellowstone is so diverse.

Anna Knapp: Mhmm.

Orville Bach: The two qualities I love the most about Yellowstone is is is its a big wild ecosystem. Ninety-eight percent of it is backcountry and it is so diverse. Its got a little bit of everything, you know mountains, wildlife, waterfalls, you name it. Thermo features.

Anna Knapp: Well.

Orville Bach: So that’s about it unless you have any other questions for me?

Anna Knapp: I don’t think so. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Orville Bach: Well thank.

Anna Knapp: We really appreciate it.

James Bigler: Yep.

Orville Bach: Thank you for doing what you are doing.

Tiffany Walton: And thank you

Orville Bach: Good project.

James Bigler: Thanks.