

LEE, Myron FS 1946 - 19__?
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**U.S. Department of Agriculture
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Region Five History Project**

Interview with: Myron Lee
Interviewed by: Larry Schmidt
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[Begin CD.]

LARRY SCHMIDT: This is Larry Schmidt. Today is January 19th. I'm in Twin Falls, Idaho, and I'm interviewing Myron Lee in regard to his experience with the FIRESCOPE program and also his Forest Service history.

Myron, can you tell me a little bit about your Forest Service career?

MYRON LEE: Yes, I can. I was a young hoodlum, referred to in the newspaper in San Diego as "a long-haired guttersnipe." I wasn't just a young hoodlum later in life, I was a young hoodlum in the third and fourth grades. I believe the teacher wrote on both my report cards from the third grade and the fourth grade that I was "inclined to mischief." Now, I thought that's a terrible to write home to tell my parents, but I suspect they may have known it anyway. But I didn't like school, and I wouldn't stay home. I was running away from home all the time. And so my stepmother finally made an appointment, and her and I went downtown San Diego to the county courthouse and met with a probation officer first and then a judge, Judge [Turntine?], and Judge Turntine told me I was going to go home and go to school. I told Judge Turntine I was not

gong to go home. If I went home, I'd just leave again. I said I wouldn't mind going to school, but I'm not going home.

Well, we had a fairly serious discussion over it, and he finally found out that I was not going to go home, so he said, "How would you like to go to Mt. Woodson?" I said, "What's Mt. Woodson?" And he said, "It's a forestry camp." And I said, "What do they do?" He said, "Oh, they plant trees and build trails and fight fire, things like that." I said, "Fine," so off I went to Mt. Woodson.

After I arrived at Mt. Woodson, I learned Mt. Woodson was the only juvenile detention facility in San Diego County at that time, and I learned that all of the kids there except me were sentenced there, and most were sentenced for six months. I stayed there for eleven and a half months because it was actually the best life I'd ever had. I loved it. The gentleman I worked for most of the time was an assistant ranger for the California Division of Forestry. That's what it was known as in those days. "Slim" Carlson, and Slim explained to me one day that he was not going to raise me the rest of my life and that he was going to get me a job and I was going to take it and I was going to do what I was told. So I said, "Okay."

So I went to work for the California Division of Forestry. I worked as a firefighter at Dulzura, [Lyons?] Valley and La Mesa, and enjoyed the work. I didn't enjoy the time we were not out working, because I thought there were a lot of things to do out there, but we were dealing with more urban type development areas, and we spent an awful lot of time polishing the fire truck, and I didn't enjoy that.

So I worked there for two seasons, and as soon as I was eighteen years old, I went to work for the Forest Service on Palomar Mountain, on the Cleveland National Forest. The two gentlemen that I remember best [clock chimes]—one was my foreman—that big rascal right

there in that picture. Clyde [Strickler?] was his name. Clyde Strickler had just come out of the Army, had been over in the Battle of the Bulge. This was 1946. And this was the first job he'd had after coming out of the Army. And he wasn't pleased with some punk kid telling him, "No." So he made sure I understood.

He was doing some paperwork in the office, and I was in the office with him, and a couple came in, asking for some information, and he told me to take care of them, so I did, and when they left, he turned his chair around and said to me, "Do you know who those folks were?" I said, "No." To tell you the truth, I didn't care. He said, "Those folks own the ranch you're working on, and if you continue to deal with people like you did them, you won't be working on this ranch very long." So he made sure I understood that the people owned that forest, not me.

Then the other gentleman was the district ranger, Fletcher Hayward, old-timer, and one of the things he told me [is] that if I planned to make a career out of the Forest Service, one of the most important things for me to remember is that I have to keep my boss out of trouble. And I managed to get through my career without getting my bosses in too much trouble. They got in trouble by themselves sometimes, but I didn't help them.

But I went through all of the fire positions on the Palomar District. I was in fire prevention, I was a crewman on a fire crew, I was a driver, Hotshot foreman, and a number of jobs, any job they had. And I stayed in those jobs up through 1952, when I went in the Army, and I went in the 11th Airborne Division in the Army and spent my two years in the Army, and when I came home I went back to work on the Palomar District.

[In] 1959 I went to the Lassen [National Forest] as a district fire control officer, GS-7. And then from there—I was there just eleven months or so, eleven, twelve months, right around a year, and I was promoted to the district fire control officer job on the Cleveland Forest on the

Tribuca District. Worked at that job for five years. Went into the Job Corps programs as deputy director for work. Now, here I am a high school dropout, a young hoodlum, and I was a GS-11, deputy director for work in a Job Corps program. And I was in that for eleven months, I believe, and I was promoted to a GS-12 and went to Alder Springs on the Mendocino Forest as the director of the Job Corps Center.

I was there for two years. I was asked then by the Office of Economic Opportunity to accept a GS-13 position in their office in San Francisco. Well, I wasn't exactly sure how this was going to work out, so I got a hold of a couple of supervisor friends of mine and talked to them about it, and they didn't know, either, so my boss said, "Look, Jack [Dinama?] is regional forester, and he'll be up here tomorrow. Why don't you come into the office, and he and you and I will sit and talk about it?"

So we did. Jack Dinama explained to me that I was a technician. [Chuckles.] I already knew that. But he told me about that, and he said, "Now, look, we, the Forest Service, are responsible for you being at the grade you are now, and when you want to come back into the regular Forest Service, we'll have a position for you. But if you go to a GS-13 in the Office of Economic Opportunity, there probably won't be a position because I don't believe there's a place in the National Forest System for a GS-13 technician." I said, "Then when would it be appropriate for me to ask to come back to the real Forest Service?" He said, "Any time you want." I said, "I'll ask today." He said, "Well, we have three forest fire control officer jobs open: the Klamath, the Plumas and the Cleveland [national forests]." Well, that didn't take any time for me to tell him where I'd take it.

So I got transferred to the Cleveland as a GS-12 fire control officer. That was in 1968, and I was in that job until I retired in 1982, and loved every blasted minute of it and did get

promoted to a GS-13, and when I retired I was a GS-13. There weren't any other technicians there. And so I was kind of proud of my career.

You know, when I was in that job, I experienced all sorts of things I didn't expect: politics, what have you. In 1970, the Laguna Fire started. Well, at the time the Laguna Fire started and the place it started was up on the top of Mt. Laguna, that mountain range that's east of San Diego, and the Sierra Club had sued us because we were trying to modify the vegetation up there. We were trying to reduce the volume of fuel. They had a lawsuit against us to stop us because we were going to affect the far view and near view and the wildlife and every other thing you can imagine.

And so when the fire started, it started moving, and after thirty hours, we already had a 120,000 acres burning. That's 4,000 acre an hour, so it was going. And, of course, it was heading toward lots and lots of developed areas. Well, up until that time, we had not had real true mutual aid with all of the cooperators in San Diego. They at that time were right at fifty fire departments in San Diego County, because San Diego County would not accept structure responsibility as their responsibility.

I'll go back and minute and tell you that we worked in three counties: Orange, Riverside and San Diego counties. Orange County had a county fire department. Riverside County didn't have a county fire department at that time, but they had the state Department of Forestry. They contracted with the state Department of Forestry to provide structure protection because they accepted that responsibility. San Diego County accepted no structure responsibility at all for anything. And we met with the board supervisors I don't know how many times with the state forestry, myself, and we could never make them understand it was necessary.

Anyway, we had our fire moving down through the heavy vegetation and all and heading toward Alpine, Pine Valley and different areas, and so we asked for mutual aid, and the dispatcher contacted everybody he could contact in the county, and all of a sudden we found ourselves with great, monstrous fire engines that didn't know what to do or where to go. We gave them some pretty serious thought. So I met with the people that I thought were in charge of these folks and explained to them that I didn't want any of them taking one of those large fire engines head first into any of these back roads; I wanted them to back in. They said, "Well, that's going to take a long time." I said, "Yes, but that's better than taking a long time when you have to back out."

So we had lots of discussions about what needed to be done, who was in charge, what authority do you have, what responsibilities do you have. Well, I made a decision during the fire that I thought I'd be in serious trouble for making, but I said to the line boss and plan service, finance, all of them—I said, "From this point forward, I want all resources directed toward the protection of life and property, and disregard perimeter control." Never heard of anybody making that kind of a decision. And I thought, *Well, I'm gonna hear about this.* But, you know, I never heard a word, not a word. It was a thing that we had to do.

By the time we finished the fire, we had burned 175,000 acres, burned over 120 homes. Now, we're still being sued by the Sierra Club. We then, after all of the claims were settled with insurance companies, all the insurance companies got together and sued us, and they sued us for allowing the vegetation to grow to the point we could not control fire in it. Now here we are, being sued on one hand for wanting to reduce it and on the other hand because we didn't. Our attorneys settled out of court with both sides. Sierra Club agreed to drop their suit if we wouldn't tell anybody, and so we didn't. We didn't tell anybody. And the insurance companies

agreed to settle for 50 percent of all provable claims, and that amounted to \$12 million. Now, this was in 1970, a lot more money than it is today.

Anyway, we found ourselves involved in things like that all the time, and we talked about all sorts of things with all our cooperators, and we decided—first of all, I'm going to join the San Diego County Fire Chiefs Association, and I did, because we needed to be sure that everybody understood what everyone else was talking about. Now, we did not see the need for anything like FIREScope. We kind of took this on as our own job on our forest and in our area.

We learned what the other fire departments had. We learned their organization. They learned ours. We met once a month, discussed everything that we could possibly discuss. For example, what authority do you have? Well, city fire departments assumed they had responsibility and the authority to evacuate people. They don't. Neither do we. That's the job of law enforcement. Our job is to tell law enforcement when you think they ought to be considering this and would suggest they do evacuate folks, but it was not our job. And so you have to learn to accept what responsibilities are yours and what authority you have and what authority you don't have.

Well, we also figured out that we weren't able to talk to each other very much. Well, prior to—I believe it was in 1972, they were going to have a Republican National Convention in San Diego, and they had allotted some money to be sure that all of the agencies that were involved in every activity there were able to work together, communicate with each other and so forth. So unbeknownst to most of the folks in the Forest Service, we established a command center—we called it a war room—in a building downtown San Diego. It's still there. [Clock chimes.] In a basement. You couldn't get in there without identification and everything. And every major agency in San Diego—Highway Patrol, sheriff's office, police departments, fire

departments—had a desk, radio, telephone, and I could go in there and pick up the radio and call any agency in the county. They could call me. I just heard on the news the other day, having to do with, oh, the national defense system that we have in place now, that San Diego is number one, with the best communications available between agencies, so—we started that.

We didn't see the name for us to change our titles or our organization. We felt the need was for us to get together and figure out how we were going to be able to work together and do things together, how we could order resources from each other and so forth. Never thought it was a problem that needed to be dealt with nationally. And I must admit that I was pretty convinced that our fire organization was the best wildland fire organization in the country or the world. And there certainly weren't many things you could point out to me that would cause me to believe I needed to change the organization or the titles or anything or anybody.

You know, we've managed to put together a system, and I had, and my assistant had in our cars, a radio. And I don't even know the name of it now. [Transcriber's note: Wolfsburg?] It was made in Germany, I believe. But anyway, I could dial up any frequency and call any fire department in San Diego County, any one of them. And we had two frequencies. We had an emergency frequency, the red frequency, and the orange one. The orange one, we could conduct our day-to-day business, if we needed to. The red—stayed off of that; we used that for fire only, or emergencies, whatever they may be.

So we were just cruising along, happy as we could be. Now, I didn't have the same kind of a system [as] Riverside or Orange County's, but on the forest, we didn't have the development like we had in San Diego. We had our share of problems and all, but not too difficult to do deal with, so we didn't go into a system like that.

I used to use—because I started training—one of the classes I used to teach at Marana [National Advanced Resource Technology Center (formerly National Fire Training Center), in Marana, Arizona] was the problems associated with the urban-rural fire interface. I talked to all sorts of people. I talked to a district ranger from Utah, and he said to me, “That’s a problem you guys have down there. We don’t have that kind of problem.” They all have that problem now. But I remember him saying to me, “Well, we have the structure responsibility in one of the canyons in our area,” and I said, “No, you don’t have the responsibility for that.” He said, “Oh, yes, we do.” I said, “Why?” And he said, “Well, because there’s no one else to do that.” And I said, “If the people want that protection, your responsibility is to help them get it, not give it to them. You’re not given funds to do structure protection. Now, true, we respond to structures, but we respond because that may be a threat to our national forests or our areas of responsibility, not because our responsibility is to protect the structure.”

So I had lots and lots of discussions with folks who had different ideas, but we managed to develop systems, and I put together a program at Marana so they could maybe understand some of the problems we had. I would point out to them that on the north side of the Palomar District, [at the] base of Palomar Mountain, if we had a wildland fire that started next to the road, it was the state Department of Forestry and Riverside County’s responsibility. If any structures were involved, that was their structure contract department’s responsibility. We had some responsibility because it would no doubt move onto the forest and up the mountain, and so you go to a fire where the state Department of Forestry is in charge, and then it moves onto you, and you can see the major fire is going to be on the forest; then you guys, because you work together, you’re able to say, “Hey, we’ll take it from here.” And that’s what we would do.

And then our fire would burn up the mountain a ways, and the first thing you know, it's going to be threatening the Agua Tibia Wilderness Area. Well, that requires a different type of fire suppression or activities, anyway. And then we would find it moving up into the structures on the mountain, itself. Now, about halfway up that mountain, you go from Riverside County to San Diego County. Now Riverside County no longer has structure responsibility up on the mountain. And we certainly didn't. But up we'd go. Now we have the Forest Service, Riverside County, state Division of Forestry, from Riverside and San Diego both, involved.

And we'd get up on the mountain, and all of the sudden the observatory, Palomar Mountain Observatory, becomes very concerned because, as they explained to us, if the area were to be burned completely, they would not have the use of that observatory for about five years. The heat waves from the earth without vegetation would be so severe that that mirror, that's so sensitive, such a monstrous thing, would be of little use to them because it would always be blurred until those heat waves were down. Now, that's an international concern, not just our concern. So anyway, we would deal with that and do everything we could to protect that area around that observatory.

We're getting into the structures, and nobody has responsibility for them up there, nobody. You know, because you've already been sued for structure payments, you know you have to do everything you can to protect them, and so you get together with your state forestry counterparts and you start talking about what are we going to do and how are we going to deal with this. And so we would resolve it and provide all the protect we could, one way or the other, and we continued to say we were protecting the resources and not the houses, but we were doing everything we could to protect everything up there.

We would get together often enough, with all our counterparts, that we were able to work hand in hand, no fighting, no problems. We'd have our disagreements, but we'd go around behind the barn and discuss things. We never let anybody know we had any disagreements. We would find that our own people wanted to do everything that wasn't their responsibility, and we would try to get the responsible agencies involved.

We were going through all of these things, and then FIREScope folks started rumbling. Again, I was convinced that we could probably do a better job than anybody else out there, and I saw all of the reasons that we needed to work together and how we could do that, but I didn't see the reason for changing the organizations. And [Robert L.] "Bob" Irwin would be the first to tell you that he and I had a number of discussions about this. Some of our discussions became loud, but we remained friends anyway, even after all that.

But we had a fire one time. It was a state fire, and it was burning toward the forest, and I told the CDF people that they needed to get some resources over there because "this thing is moving toward the forest, and you guys are protecting all these structures over here in the canyon, and you're ignoring us. And you can't do that." They said, "Well, we'll do the best we can." I said, "Well, if what you're doing is the best you can, well, that's not good enough. And so either you zone this fire or we'll take charge of the fire, because you're threatening the national forest now."

I didn't know if I had the authority to do that, but I heard I had, so that's what I told him we were going to do. So we zoned the fire. We put a Forest Service man on the north end of the fire, where the forest was being threatened, and the state forestry took care of the south end. Everything was going well. Bob Irwin came down to the fire. Lynn [R.] Biddison was director of fire at that time, came down to the fire. Bob Irwin said, "FIREScope system does not allow

for zoning the fire.” I said, “I don’t care.” And he said, “Well, you have to care. We’re working on this FIREScope program, and we have to learn how to do this.” I said, “Look, if the system doesn’t allow us to do what has to be done out here, then change the system. Don’t tell me that we can’t do things that we have to do out here because of the system, so change the system if it doesn’t meet our needs.” Bob and I had discussions like this all the time, and we’re still in communication with each other. We still talk.

All sorts of problems with authorities, like I say, as to who has what authority. I saw us going more and more to where our own employees thought we had all of this authority, and during one period I was acting supervisor on the forest, and the [unintelligible] fire crew called the dispatcher and said, “We have a reported heart attack at Glen Ivy Hot Springs.” We’re responding. I said, “Tell them negative on the response; we’ll notify the responsible agency.”

And I went back to the office, and I knew I’d have a phone call. And pretty soon the district ranger called on the phone, and he said, “Hey, are you running this district up here or am I?” I said, “Well, you’re supposed to, but if you don’t, I will. Your people do not have responsibility to respond [with] a fire truck and crew to a heart attack. That’s not our business. We’re not trained.” “Well,” he said, “we have some people that have gone through this training.” I said, “I don’t care. It’s not our responsibility.”

So you go through that, and you find as you rename our own people and you no longer call them a fire crew foreman or something, he’s now a captain or a battalion chief or something else, pretty soon, you know, they believe they have authority to do just about everything and anything and go anywhere, do anything. And I would try to point out to them that we had funds that were set up for certain things, and not doing everybody else’s job.

So it was a tough, tough time to go through all of this, in particularly where we were so involved with other departments and agencies. [Clock chimes.] You know, if I added up all of the fire departments and all of the agencies in the three districts that we dealt with, my goodness, it was a mess. You know, there's a bunch of them. So you can't have our people trying to do all of those jobs that are theirs.

I'm very happy to see that all of the agencies are now able to work together, and I don't care if they call him an incident commander or whatever they call him. I'd like to see the people probably better trained on doing *their* jobs and not others'. And, you know, our jobs were so much different. When the city fire trucks came out to Pine Valley and all of a sudden I recognized that—you know, now, here's a guy that is accustomed to fighting a stationary fire. Now all of a sudden he's going to fight a fire that's moving. I know he's going to go out there and put his blocks out and everything else and set up that fire truck so it can't move. Can't do that.

And so it's quite a difference between departments, agencies. Now I see there's more and more people working together, so the incident command or FIRESCOPE program was probably the only way that they could have accomplished this, because you couldn't expect every department and every agency in areas to get together like we did. You see, one of the things that allowed us to do the things we did was that the government gave us money to set up a command center for the upcoming Republican National Convention, so we had money to buy the equipment and set this system up. We were very fortunate to have that. We worked together for years after that, years and years. It was extremely good for us, and good for the other people, the cities, fire districts. You know, when you have all of the fire districts and cities and structure protection is a bit of a problem, and here's a little fire department up at Alpine, and Alpine has a

structure fire and it's going to spread to the wildlands within their district, they wanted an air tanker. Well, they didn't have an air tanker.

In the early days, they didn't understand why they couldn't have one. They didn't understand we didn't own them and it wasn't ours to give. Now, if we were going to be threatened, we could use that air tanker there. We couldn't just do it for everybody who had a whim, and so those kind of things that we were faced with almost daily caused us to see early on that it was extremely important that we do something so we could all work together.

And I think that the two lessons I learned when I first went to work—remember who owns the place, and keep your boss out of trouble—and while I was the forest fire control officer on the Cleveland, I worked for five supervisors. I never got any one of them in trouble. If they got in trouble, it was their own fault. And I don't think most of them had any idea what we were even doing. I used to try to keep them informed, but I think of the five supervisors that I worked for in that job, I only remember one of them coming out to a fire we had. Now, maybe the others came and I didn't know about it, but I don't remember it, anyway.

For old Bob Irwin—I have to give him credit, reluctantly. But he was a bull in the woods with that FIREScope system, and he made it work. [Chuckles.] And now I can see more and more the need for it, but I certainly couldn't in those days.

I can't think of too many more things I could tell you that would be of interest. Yes, I thought others should change; I didn't see any reason for us to change anything.

SCHMIDT: How did your operations change when FIREScope came in? Did you gradually transition to that, and what was your impression of it at the time you retired?

LEE: I could see all of the things that were happening, but I'm not sure actually when we had to start managing fires using the new system, because I don't ever remember being called the

incident commander or anything like that; I was the fire boss. See, 1977 was the Marble-Cone Fire, and we were still using the old system, and I went to many fires after that. The major fires that I went to were all still being managed under the old system. We all were learning the new system, but I don't know that I ever had to manage a fire under the new system, although it wouldn't make any difference to me what I would be called or what the other folks would be called. I'm quite sure I could take my fire team or whatever, the incident command team, whatever you want to call it, and I think I could go anywhere and manage any incident, because it wasn't so much that you needed to know all the tactical parts of the job, you needed to know how to manage the organization, and the management of organizations is really the key to success or failure. If you can't manage your organization, then everything underneath it is going to pot.

SCHMIDT: You had mentioned earlier the coordination between the three different counties and the way that they approached things. Did you see a gradual change in the ability of those counties to cooperate on fires and to cooperate with the Forest Service as you approached the end of your career? Did FIREScope have any effect on that?

LEE: Yes, I think it has. Yes, it has had. Most of the problem or—didn't affect us because, you know, heck, I had worked with nearly every one of the chiefs of the different counties for years. And so we didn't have our problems. I could see some problems with the other departments who [sic; which] thought, *All of a sudden we're all going to be one big happy family, and anything I want, I can get.* Well, when they started thinking that, they would call us for everything.

As an example, the city, I believe it was the city of National City. National City had a pier that went out in the bay, and for some reason it caught fire. Now, this pier was a very popular fishing pier. The mayor went out in a boat and was throwing buckets of water on the

pier, trying to put it out. And all of the time he was crying because the Forest Service wouldn't send its helicopter to pick up water and put it [there]. Well, first of all, our helicopters that we had on contract didn't have that ability to scoop water up out of someplace, and this was at night. We couldn't fly at night in those days with our ships. And we had no way to know who's going to pay for this. And so he was on television constantly, raising a fuss because we wouldn't send our helicopter. I finally called the fire chief, who [sic; whom] I knew very well, and I said, "Now, will you tell your mayor that if he says one more derogatory remark about us, I'm going to get on TV and tell him how stupid he is." So we had problems like that, because people wanted us to do everything. And they didn't understand that we didn't own the helicopters and all of that sort of thing.

Back in the early seventies, I had a call from a military gentleman, and colonel in the Marine, and he wanted to come in and talk to me, and so I met with him. And he said, "Now, we're going to be doing some testing up at [Camp] Pendleton, and we're going to have some fires. It may be on the base, and it may be on you. Now, I need to talk to you about working this out. How are we going to deal with it?"

So I went up and met with him at Pendleton, and he pointed out to me and he showed me the devices. They were going to fire some missiles across Camp Pendleton, and they were going to shoot them down with a laser. Now, things he wanted: he wanted one of our lookouts that was right there near the base to be on duty so they could pinpoint where the fires were, and then he wanted our air tankers and helicopters to be available. So I had to make him understand that we didn't own those rascals, but if he wanted to negotiate a contract with them, and [if] we didn't have a fire, I'd make them available.

And so we were involved with some of the dumbest things you've ever seen or heard. People expected us to provide everything. The state Department of Forestry asked for our air tanker to respond to a fire, and we responded to a fire in the city of San Marcos. Well, we didn't go for the city of San Marcos, we were going because the state forestry asked us to go. And then, of course, we billed the state forestry. Well, they thought we should bill San Marcos. Well, we didn't have any agreement with San Marcos to bill—so, you know, when you get so involved with each other, pretty soon you start spending money you don't have or telling people to do things they shouldn't be doing. So you have to be careful with that.

But I was fortunate. I grew up in fire, and so I knew what to expect most of the time. And, as I say, I loved every blasted minute of it.

SCHMIDT: Let's take a break here.

[Recording interruption.]

SCHMIDT: It should be recording now.

LEE: Okay. When I went to work, I was an SP-3, which was before they had GS-2 or GS grades. I was a crewman on Palomar Mountain, and I was still ornery when I went up there. I was an ornery little brat. The first night I was up there on the mountain, the driver, [Charles] "Charlie" [Kerns?], said to me—he said, "We're goin' to a party tonight." I said, "I'm not goin' to a party." "Well," he said, "you have to go." I said, "No, don't tell me I have to go to a party. If I want to go to a party, I will. You don't tell me I have to go." He said, "You have to. They're going to have a party and welcome you to the mountain." I said, "I don't care who's having a party for who, I ain't goin'." And I didn't. Charlie went. Had a good time. And later I

met all of those folks, and they were all real nice people. We all got along well. But I was just an ornery brat.

Anyway, I worked there all 1946 as a crewman, and then in the middle of 1947 I was promoted to a driver at Lake Henshaw, but they didn't raise my pay because they said they didn't have any money to do that. So I worked as a driver, but I was happy with that because I had a badge, even, you know. [Chuckles.] Anyway, then in 1948 I was a driver at Dripping Springs [Campground]. And I worked all that year as a driver, but I was still drawing crewman pay because they didn't have any money to raise my pay. I was earning \$1,440 a year, and it wasn't like it was going to break the bank, but anyway, I didn't get a pay raise.

And then in 1949 I was a Hotshot foreman, and I still drew crewman's pay. And then in 1950 I was a foreman at Oak Grove [Campground]. Lois and I had gotten married in 1949, and then we were bringing home sixty-seven dollars every two weeks. But I had a title and a badge. [Chuckles.] I was enjoying it all. I loved it anyway. We moved around a lot. I think Lois tells me we moved—

LOIS LEE: Sixteen times in eighteen years.

LEE: Sixteen times the first eighteen years we were married.

L. LEE: I know how to pack.

LEE: If you have a wife that stays with you through the Forest Service career in those days, you were fortunate. But it was in 1951, I believe, before they finally raised my pay to—and by that time, they had changed grades, so I went to a GS-3. Oh! I wanted to be at least—I was already an SP-3. But, you know, in those days we did everything. We never were sitting at the station; we were out putting out wildlife drinkers or quail guzzlers and we built browseways, we were working on a road. We had our own [motor?] graders in those days and our own bulldozers, and

we learned to do everything. Some of the things that we built, like quail guzzlers and wildlife drinkers, I know where they are and they're still there. It's kind of nice to be able to look back and see that you did amount to something.

SCHMIDT: Changing the subject a little bit, one of the things I was curious about: You mentioned when you first encountered the difficulty in knowing what resources other people had, that the system evolved where you could track other people's resources. I assume that was before the advent of computers and things like that. How was that done?

LEE: Because we met—all of the fire chiefs in San Diego met once a month, and every time somebody got something new, we talked about it. We developed our systems by knowing what everybody else had. We located our fire engines sometimes or our tankers, we called them in those days—we located them, I mean the various types, where we knew no one else had something that might be able to do that kind of a job for us.

Of course, it wasn't just a seasonal thing because the Cleveland National Forest, when I retired, had the longest established fire season of any forest in the nation, and so we could have something at almost any time, and we did. I spent more Christmases and Thanksgivings and New Year's on fires than I did home. We would get together and—

I have to tell you we helped some of our neighbors at times—now, not only on this side of the border but on the other side. The fire chief in Tijuana, Mexicali, Tijuana, even down as far as Ensenada would come to our fire schools, and some of their people would come to our fire schools, and we would help train them with our equipment, because they didn't have anything. The only thing it cost Uncle [Sam] for us to do that was the meals. We fed them while they were there, and we trained those guys all the time.

Then we would meet in Mexico with the Mexican fire departments, and so we knew what they had and didn't have, and when we had something that was worn out or needed to be discarded because our fire hose—for example, our fifty-foot length fire hose had been broken so many times that we now had, instead of a fifty-foot length of hose, we'd have three lengths of hose or four lengths of hose, very short, and really created more of a problem for us than it did to get rid of it, so we would make sure that some of our cooperators that needed some help would get it. One of the reasons I felt we could do that was that I was told when a fire district wants to be formed, that people want a fire district, our responsibility was to help them in any way we could. So that was one of the ways we could help them. Some of our old equipment you'll find all over the country.

We found ourselves with the other fire departments in San Diego County—once a year the fire chiefs in San Diego County met in [Tocati?]. We would rent a buy, a Gray Lines bus, and go over to Tocati with a whole busload of fire chiefs, and in the baggage compartment were lots of boxes of old fire hose, old fire nozzles that somebody couldn't use and whatever, anything we could, because any fire that started over there—it became ours, you know, because it would come across. Anyway, the state Department of Forestry, with the Forest Service, managed to get a surplus fire truck for Tocati, and we delivered it to them down there.

So we did lots and lots of things together, and so we knew what everybody else had. We knew what their district boards would allow them to do and not, so we really—you better spend some time at it. And you have to have the right kind of people working with you and for you.

When I retired, I convinced Ralph Cisco, the supervisor, that [Steven? Stephen?] “Steve” Gallegos, my assistant, would be the best guy he could ever pick to fill my job, and I said, “Now, I'm not going to tell you that technically he's the best fireman in the world because I'm not,

either. I just knew how to manage people, and that's what he can do. But for you, he can go talk to the loggers or the Ladies Aid Society. It doesn't matter where you send him, he'll never embarrass you or get you in trouble. And he knows how to work with all these cooperators. Everybody likes him. " So he finally selected Steve, and Steve—

You know, after I retired and Steve took my job—you know, they had the earthquake in Mexico City. Well, Steve Gallegos was selected—now, Steve Gallegos is Mexican, but he doesn't speak Spanish. I introduced him to the fire chief in Tocati, who was El Jefe Tomas [Stronco?], and I introduced Steve Gallegos, and Tomas Stronco started talking to Steve in Mexican, and Steve looked at me. I said, "Don't look at me, stupid. It's your language, not mine."

SCHMIDT: [Laughs.]

LEE: Anyway, we had such good relations with the folks, and [were] able to communicate with everybody and did it on a basis often enough so we didn't lose sight of what other folks were doing. Whenever anybody got a new fire truck, we all knew—we would try to hold our meeting out at their fire station, anything new that was happening. So we were together pretty much all the time. In fact, Lois thought that we were full-time politicians [clock chimes], because we went to—if you have fifty fire departments, you know there's always a fire chief retiring or being promoted or something, and so Lois and I went to party after party after party for all of the folks. But we got to know them all, you know? She can still tell you the names of half of the fire chiefs. [Laughs.]

SCHMIDT: In terms of communications across the border, did you have some fires that came across from Mexico, and how did you handle the communications and coordination with them during an incident?

LEE: We had fires come across the border quite often, and in those days they really didn't do very much until we started getting together with them. They really didn't do much to even put them out on their own side of the border, let alone on our side. But we found ourselves—now, Ralph Cisco will tell you that—he was afraid I was going get him in trouble because we were going across the border every once in a while, with a government car, and I told him that the State Department gave us authority to do that. He never saw that authority, and later on, after I'd retired, he and I were talking about it, and I said, "Well, I never really saw it, either, but I was told we have it, so I'm still assuming we had State Department approval to do that."

But we were back and forth across with them all the time, and the only thing we really had to be careful with was the air tankers. We really couldn't legally fly south of the border with the air tankers, and I'm sure none of them ever put a retardant across the line, that I knew of, anyway. I didn't see if it they did. But you did what you had to do, and I guess keep your mouth shut.

SCHMIDT: [Laughs.]

One of the things that kind of interests me about fires in southern California is the number of incendiary fires, the ones that are set by people. Did you have much experience with that where you were? Was that a problem?

LEE: It was always a problem. I can tell you that of the people that intentionally set fires, the majority of them that we caught were our own employees. There were some on some of the other forests the same way. Wanted I guess to make a name for themselves or whatever, for whatever reason. But, you know, we used to not receive any overtime at all in the Forest Service. I mean, we just worked. When they started paying overtime, then we started seeing more and more. Some departments pay so much money that their employees—I won't go into

“who’s” or whatever, but Lois and I know a gentleman that earned enough money on a fire in overtime that when he came home, he bought a brand new Toyota pickup with his overtime. So the money that people are making in some cases now is an invitation.

Now, there are also contractors that you have to watch constantly, and we did. We watched the Indian crews. You know, in San Diego County or on the Cleveland Forest, either within or immediately adjacent to the forest, we had seventeen different Indian reservations. We used to put together fire crews from the reservations, and I used to tell them, when we put the crews together, “You will not be used on any local fires. If they have a fire over in Arizona or New Mexico, we’ll send you, but you’re not going to be used on any local fire.” People used to just cry about that because we knew we had Indian crews available to us and we wouldn’t use them. I wouldn’t use them today, either, and it’s not just because they’re Indian, but it was just that it would be difficult to put together a crew of somebody other than the Indians out in that country. So that’s what we had available.

But the money that some of them are making is problem to me. I didn’t enjoy being told I couldn’t go to fishing because I had to stick around, if you weren’t going to pay me, but that’s what they did. It was that way a lot. But incendiary fires are always a problem. My wife’s brother was a district fire control officer on the Cleveland, and whenever we had any incendiary fires, if it was on his district, I would call him and tell him to send me his [unintelligible] schedule. “I want to know who was off duty, who was on duty, and then we’ll start checking.” I told him, “Check your own first.” That was my policy. It made a lot of folks mad, but we had some of our own who set them.

In our office, of course, when I retired, we were in the Federal Building downtown, and we had right next to us the U.S. attorney’s office and we had the Alcohol and Tobacco tax folks,

the FBI, everybody that we ever really had need for right there available to us, and so we could really keep pretty good tabs on folks if we needed to. Like I say, we had a number of them, our own employees.

SCHMIDT: It's more common than I realized.

One of the other questions I had was with regard to the dispatch office, when the Republican convention came and they set up the war room, did that change how your dispatch office worked? Did they move into that area or were they still [cross-talk; unintelligible]?

LEE: No, our dispatch stayed where they were, and the only people that went in that war room were management people from the various departments, the heads of the departments or the chiefs or whatever of the major departments in the county.

You know, the convention didn't come to San Diego, because after all that work they did and the money they spent—I can tell you the money was put to good use. It put together a system that allowed us to all communicate with each other and work together. But everything stayed out where it was. You couldn't even get—well, most people couldn't find it. They wouldn't even know where it was. But if you went into the war room, you had to show your identification, and they had certain people they let in. It was kind of a little bit ahead of its time.

And I guess because we were doing all of these things, it caused us to drag our feet a little bit more when it came to changing our organizations, you know? I used to say to myself, *Geez, they just learned what a fire boss is. I don't want them to—we have enough trouble.* So it did cause us that problem, but other than that, that war room was just great for us. Great.

And we all learned how to—well, we had a wildland fire up the Ramona area, and Ramona had a fire district, and the state forestry—now, we had a mutual aid agreement that covered every department in the county. We had various ones with different ones. In Ramona,

for example, we had wildland in Ramona that was within our initial attack zone, even though it was outside the forest. And we had a station up there, so we were usually first there anyway. Then the fire district had the responsibility for structures in that area. So here comes the CDF and the Forest Service and this fire district. Now, who's in charge of the fire?

The CDF ranger—when he got there, he said, “Who's in charge of this fire.” I said, “Well, you and that fire chief from Ramona.” He said, “Where is he?” I said, “I don't know, but I know what you need to do. Either you need to get in his vehicle with him or he needs to get in yours with you so you guys can run this thing, and both of you can assume the responsibility that's yours.” Because, again, I knew all these guys. You know, you could tell people to do things like that and not have a whole lot of trouble. And so that's what they did.

As I said before, the management of the incident is very, very important. I've told so many people. I never was that interested in the details about fire, like on this slope, with this vegetation and this weather condition, the flame height is X number of feet high. That was not a concern to me because I knew from looking at it where it was going and about how long it was going to take to get there. And I knew what we were going to have to have to do it, and that was where my strong suit [was]. I rarely ever had serious disagreements on fires, rarely ever, because I never tried to assume somebody else's responsibility or authority, and I certainly wasn't going to give them mine. [Chuckles.] So it just was a life that I enjoyed and got along in.

And, you know, I told Lois a number of times—the last ten years I worked, I was teaching over at Marana, in different areas, but I really felt like I earned my keep after I was teaching people about the urban-rural fire interface problem, because most people never experienced it like we did. I really enjoyed that part of it.

I don't know if—if you've taught a Marana, you must have known John [Hossick?].

SCHMIDT: I've run across him.

LEE: John Hossick was on the Bitterroot [National] Forest [in Montana]. He was always up in Montana most of his career. And he was deputy supervisor on the Bitterroot, and then he was supervisor on the Clearwater [National Forest] out of Orofino [Idaho] when he retired. He and I met at Marana, and he was always a plans chief on a fire team, and I was fire boss on a fire team. [Clock chimes.] And he and I became friends, and we still see each other quite a bit, and we go up there and he comes down here. We're very good friends. We traveled all over the country.

[Recording interruption.]

LEE: Yes, I was wondering whether you ever met John Hossick.

SCHMIDT: I haven't met him.

LEE: As I was saying before, he and I never had a work assignment together. We traveled together all over the country, from the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska to wherever the people needed to be trained in how to be a fire boss or how to be a plans chief. He and I hardly ever say anything complimentary to one another, but we've known each other now for a long, long time. I don't think either of us ever had a cross word with the other one. We've just wound up to be friends. He is an Ottawa Indian, and he grew up on a piece of property his father homesteaded that now lies within Glacier National Park, and so he grew up in that country, out in the woods. For spare money or spending money, he would ride in the rodeos whenever they were around, do that kind of stuff.

He was in charge of the only remount station the Forest Service ever had up in Montana. And when John married his wife Tana, who is named after the state of Montana—when he

married her—her father was a judge in Kalispell, I believe. And so she certainly grew up a different lifestyle than John. Well, John was in charge of that remount station, and when they married, he took Tana with him, and they went out to the remount station. And when they got to the remount station, John said the cook they had—I think her name was Lil or something like that—said she was inclined to take a nip now and again and had gotten drunk and had fallen down behind the stove. And as soon as they got there, the guys needed John because they had some problem with a mule or something out there, and so John told Tana—he said, “Wake ol’ Lil up and get her sobered up enough to cook supper.” And he left. And John’s wife Tana said to me—she said, “You know, I just sat down and cried. I wondered what had ever happened that I deserved this.” [Laughs.] But anyway, they were married a long, long time, till she died.

Anyway, he’s just a fine gentleman, and he and I have just been all over together. And like I say, never had a work assignment together. I would tell him, “I don’t think you ever really worked as a plans chief. I don’t think you have enough smarts to do that.” And he would make the same kind of comments to me.

Funny: His son—while we were up when they buried his daughter—and he had one of his sons [clock chimes]—he’s a contractor over in Washington, and this son said to me the following morning—that night, John and I sat out on the porch and his son and played cribbage and had a drink. And we just had a good visit. And his son said to me the next morning—he said, “You know, that was really one of the highlights of my life, I believe, because, you know, I never really knew what my dad did. You know, I knew what his job was and all, but I never knew that he was involved in all of these different things that you guys talked about.” And he said, “And besides that,” he said, “I have never heard him talk to anybody the way he talks to you, and I never heard anybody talk to him the way you talk to him.”

I thought that was kind of an interesting thing, because a lot of times we do go through life and our kids don't really know what we're doing. I know my son didn't know half the things we did, and I kind of regret that now. But I used to try to take him with me as often as I could. He's gone to a number of fires with me, because he was out in the woods with me when we'd have a fire. So he did have a little experience at it, but it would have been nice to taken him more. But in this day and age, you can't take your family for a ride in a government car.

SCHMIDT: I spent a lot of time in the back seat of a government vehicle—

LEE: [Laughs.]

SCHMIDT: —before it was disallowed. I got a lot of education I wouldn't have got otherwise.

LEE: You know, that was a different experience for me. Now, I grew up on the Cleveland, and when we had a smoke reported—I mean, the fire—the tankers, we called them—tankers and everybody was on their way. Went to the Lassen, and the lookout would report a smoke. The lookout at Prospect Peak was the best one we had there. He or she would report a smoke, and the dispatcher would say, “Well, keep an eye on it. If it looks like it's building at all, we'll see if we can get somebody out there.” Oh, geez! I was a nervous wreck!

And then we had a lightning storm come through, and we had over thirty smokes on the district. I called the dispatcher and I said, “You know, we only have eleven firemen on the district, and we have over thirty fires going. We need some help.” He said, “Well, forget it, because we've got sixty-five or seventy fires going on the forest, and we just don't have anybody left, so set some priorities, do what you think is right, and we'll see what you can do.” So we did. And you know my guys would put them all out. But it was a different world for me.

SCHMIDT: Yes, there were a lot of differences.

One of the things before we close out the interview, Lee, is I was wondering if you could identify the supervisors that you worked for on the Cleveland, just the names. That would be helpful.

LEE: When I went to work in that position, the supervisor was [Stanley] “Stan” Stevenson, who is still alive. I talk to him once in a while. We communicate with each other quite often. He left right after the 1970s fires, and Ken Clark, Kenton Clark, they call him—again, another one—we still communicate with each other. Kenton Clark took his place. And then [Donald] “Don” Smith took Kenton’s place. Then “Fritz” [DeHall?] came in, and then Ralph Cisco came in. I maybe told you before, but I think of all the time—well, I was there for fifteen years, and I only remember one fire that Stan Stevenson came to that I was on. If any of the others ever came to a fire, I wouldn’t know it. I don’t remember it. But that was the only one. That was on the Laguna Fire, by the way, and don’t remember any of them ever coming into a fire, which I always wondered why they didn’t, but now I consider it kind of a compliment because they were comfortable with what we were doing.

SCHMIDT: Yes.

LEE: I didn’t do everything correct [sic; correctly] all the time, and they certainly didn’t hesitate to tell me about it. But, you know, we got along fine. In fact, Lois and I have been down to Ralph’s place a couple of times in the past month, so we still see Ralph Cisco, and we talk with the others. Stan Stevenson is really getting along in years. Anyway, they were all fine. Had a good time with all of them.

SCHMIDT: Well, Myron, thank you very much for this interview. It’s been very helpful, and I’m sure they’re going to enjoy your insights to a long and interesting career.

LEE: I hope so. Thanks for coming, and I hope it works out for you.

SCHMIDT: Thank you.

LEE: Send me a copy of the book.

SCHMIDT: [Laughs.] Okay.

[End of interview.]