Smithsonian Folklife Interview

Kelly Esterbrook
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Willamette National Forest
Sweethome, Oregon

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Interviewer: Carol Winkler

Carol Winkler (CW): [My name is] Carol Winkler, and I'm here in Sweethome Ranger District visiting with Kelly Esterbrook, and it's July 21st 2004. We'll start out by asking Kelly what year and where you were born.

Kelly Esterbrook (KE): I was born in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1956. March 3rd.

CW: And was your, had your family always lived in Laramie?

KE: No. No. My mother came from a little town called Oregon, Missouri, and my dad had moved from Chillicothe, Missouri to Laramie, where he worked for the Union Pacific Railroad. And about three months after I was born my father was transferred to Portland, Oregon, and so I really have grown up in Oregon.

CW: Oh, okay. Where did you move to in Oregon?

KE: Portland.

CW: Okay. Did you grow up in the Portland school system?

KE: Yep.

CW: And did you get… Were your parents interested in the outdoors? Did you get a chance to go camping?

KE: We didn't do a lot of camping, but we did a lot of picnicking. Going out of the city, you know, to the rivers, and Sunday drives, and to the coast.

CW: Do you think that's where you maybe developed an interest in the outdoors?

KE: Probably. You know, I think maybe just the nature of, you know, where my parents came from. They were, my mom especially, came from country folk, farm folk, a little bit of that nature. I think that independently my nature was a tomboy, and I always would rather be outside in a place where I could find brush in the city; that's where I was. Or up in a tree. So.

CW: So did you… What did you think you'd do when you grew up, when you were a kid? Did you have any ideas?

KE: You know, I didn't. I just remember always saying that I wasn't going to be a secretary. [Laughs] My mom had to demand that I take typing my senior year in high school. But I think that I knew that I wanted to do something outside. And the Forest Service, once I started college, I knew that I wanted to work for the Forest Service. You know, in between. Summers.

CW: Where did you go to school?

KE: I started out going to Southern Oregon in Ashland. And went… That got interrupted by a trip around the United States with another friend of mine when we were twenty. And I came back and went to Portland State again. And then back to Southern Oregon. And then I started working for the Forest Service, up out of the Rogue River. And up at Prospect. And it all started there, and I kept saying I was going back to school and finish out. And they kept saying, you can work this spring, you can work this fall, and it kind of evolved.

CW: Were you in Fire at the first?

KE: I was in brush disposal my first year. In fact, when I applied for the job I kept calling and calling and calling, asking if they had something. They kept telling me [no]. Finally one day they called and said, we have a job but you really don't want it. We have to offer it to you but you really don't want it. I said, well what is it? They said, it's cutting in front of a [cat]. Well, what's that? Well, you use a chain saw, da da da.. They said, you really don't want this job, but you're on the list, we have to go through the list. I said, well, do you train? They said, well yeah, but you don't want this job. I said, I'll take it. [Laughs] So my first year I worked, you know, using a chain saw in front of a [cat] operation that's bucking logs for them and small trees. And then the next year I moved on to an engine crew. I was an engine crew member.

CW: Okay. So what was the cutting front of the cat for?

KE: They were doing brush disposal. It was a [track mac] mini-muncher. Go across the ground and tear up the fields and munch them down. I think they call it a Tomahawk. [Laughter]

CW: So were there any other women on the crew at that time?

KE: No.

CW: [Laughs] No [writ].

KE: No. Yeah.

CW: So did you feel welcome? Or was it awkward at first?

KE: It was a little awkward. A little awkward. The next year things started to kind of evolve in that realm. The only… There was one other gal on the engine. Well, no, there wasn't after the first year I was there. I was the only gal on the engine crew. And we had a hot shot crew there at the district also. And the engine crew was supposed to be a relief crew for the hot shot crew. And every time it came to my name, they'd bypass me.

CW: Skip you.

KE: Yeah. So I inquired about it, and they said, well, we want you to have a little more experience. I said, that's fine. So I had a couple fires under my belt, and I went back, and they said, well, okay. We'll put you on the list. But they kept going by me. So I ended up not knowing the system. I didn't even know what an FMO—or a fire management officer—was at the time. Somebody told me, go to the EEO. And I did. And things kind of broke loose.

CW: [Laughs] That shook 'em up a little bit.

KE: Shook 'em up a little bit. And the next year the hot shot crew was mandated to have women. O.

CW: What year was that? Do you recall?

KE: That was in 1980 that the crew had to start having women. And that was an interesting year. [Laughs]

CW: How many did they manage to find the first year?

KE: They actually came up with six women. Six women.

CW: Were you one of them?

KE: Yes. They called, and I kind of felt a little bit responsible. [CW laughs] It was a bit of a result of raising the issue.

CW: So how did that go, that first year?

KE: It was… The issue was there. Half the crew came back. Actually the crew boss quit, and the other half of the crew, the hot shot crew, would not come back because of women.

CW: Wow.

KE: And the remainder, there was a good portion of them that didn't want to see women there, and they played their tricks. By the end of the year, probably the tell-tale sign was, we had one woman that was raped by crew members.

CW: Wow. That's pretty serious.

KE: Yeah. It was serious. I mean, action was taken, but to me there a lot that had gone on through the year that shouldn't have gone on.

CW: That maybe led up to that, that they thought they could get away…? That should have been stopped, behavior?

KE: Yeah. There was verbal abuse, you know, that led to then a physical abuse. So consequently the next year only two of us came back. [CW laughs]

CW: You weren't going to give up though, huh?

KE: Yeah. And it was precisely for that reason. [Laughs] "You're not getting rid of me." But there was also, you know, guys on the crew that were supportive. But it was quiet; kind of quiet support. Back then it was, you know, okay to be verbal about it.

CW: [It's changed a little.]

KE: [A little bit, yeah.]

CW: So, how long did you remain on that hot shot crew?

KE: Two years. Two years. And then they moved it to the Winema. And at that time I chose, you know, not to go back, and moved on. Moved on to the east side, Crescent Ranger District, and became an engine foreman there. And that's where I started my permanent career.

CW: So you were driving the engine?

KE: Yeah.

CW: Okay. And, what kind of a crew did you have?

KE: Just actually one person, at that time. Now you have to have three on an engine. And at that time it was just one.

CW: Were you able to select that person?

KE: No.

CW: They were selected for you?

KE: Yeah.

CW: Was it a male or a female?

KE: At that time it was a female. I had a couple of females consecutively. And it's kind of ironic to go from the environment of, you know, we all want you, to, the two candidates I had the next

two years on the engine were minority candidates. Female minorities. One woman came from New Mexico. That was kind of neat to learn her culture. The next one came from the wild, wild country of L.A. [Laughs]

CW: Oh wow. [Laughs]

KE: Of Hispanic descent.

CW: Oh. Interesting.

KE: Yeah.

CW: You got exposed to some cultural diversity there.

KE: Yep. Yep. A walk to the other side. I think that's when we were having, you know, a huge push to get women and minorities.

CW: The early '80s.

KE: Yeah.

CW: So how long did you remain in that job?

KE: That job, I was there on that district five years, and out of that five years I went to the Redmond Hotshot fire management crew. It's a training crew for fire management up at Redmond, Oregon. And that was kind of a turning point. I think at that time I was really questioning whether I wanted to stay in Fire. It seemed boring to me on the engine. We didn't get very many fires every year, and so I went to that crew saying, well, this will be the year that I decide whether I want to get out of Fire and the Forest Service, or stay in. And had a great year. Met a lot of great people, and stayed in it. And from that crew I was recommended to go to the Redmond Smokejumpers.

CW: Wow.

KE: Yeah.

CW: So you applied?

KE: I applied, and I went to their boot camp [Indicates quotes].and made that, and ended up staying there for ten years.

CW: Wow. Ten years you were at the smokejumper base in Redmond?

KE: Uh huh.

CW: And what year did you start?

KE: I started there in ’86.

CW: ’86.Yeah. Okay. So how many other gals were on the smokejumper crew with you?

KE: At the Redmond base they’d only had one other gal come for a year, and then she was injured and didn’t really work past that year. Packed it in as a smokejumper. So our rookie year I think we had four, five women… four women make the training, and those women were split up, and two of us stayed at Redmond and the other two of the others went to the Winthrop, Washington jumper base. So it was just two of us, Irene [Zaffer] and I, that were at Redmond.

CW: How difficult was the training?

KE: Oh, it was very difficult, physically. I trained for a whole year with Irene. During the winter that’s all we did, every day, just physically train, physically train. And some liken the training… we had marines that came in ad said it’s worse than the marine training.

CW: Ow.

KE: Yeah. But it was challenging and fun, and you know, an accomplishment.

CW: Yes. So what would be a typical workout kind of routine, in terms of the weight room and what-not?

KE: Prior to the training?

CW: Yeah.

KE: I would do aerobic exercise every day. A lot of running. A lot of, you know, alternating long distance and then speed work on the track, and we’d alternate that every other day. Two-hour workouts every day in the gym on the weights. And then, one of the tasks in smokejumping, you jump in and you haul out everything on your back that is jumped in to you, or dropped in to you.

CW: So how much weight are you expected to carry?

KE: That’s about eighty-five to, can range up to, we trained with a hundred and twenty pounds. So that was part of our training. We’d fill big old duffel bags with straps, with, you know, dog food and weights, [CW laughs] and go hiking up in the hills.

CW: What was your weight at the time, if I may ask?

KE: My weight at the time… About a hundred and thirty-five pounds. And some of the other gals were much… I was one of the larger women.

CW: Carrying more than your own weight.

KE: Yeah. Some of the women had trouble making the weight. You had to be at least a hundred and twenty pounds, and you couldn't be over two hundred pounds.

CW: Was there any height [requirement]?

KE: There was. There was, and I can't remember the height requirement. I think it was over six foot. But we did, we had guys, a couple of them, that were over six foot. It was just harder for them to get out the door, jumping.

CW: Oh. [They go] minimum height.

KE: Yes, there was. In fact the first woman, in 1982, she battled all of that. She wasn't a hundred and twenty pounds, and she was shorter than the requirement. But they also had men that were shorter and weighed less too. But they turned her down the first year. She made all the physical requirements, as far as, you know, the working out and stuff. And they sent her away, and she went and fought it. That was [Deanne Shulman], And she became the first woman smokejumper, in 1982.

CW: Have you ever met her?

KE: Yes. Yes, yes, yes. In fact, I wore my shirt today. This is, I gotta show this. [Rises and turns to display the back of her shirt: "20 years of Women in Smokejumping"] This is "20 years of Women in Smokejumping". All the women that have been in the smokejumping system; at ten years we got together, and then again at twenty years, which was in 19… 2002. We got together at Sun Valley, Oregon, and we honored Deanne Shulman there. She spoke.

CW: Cool. So you kind of have your own sorority, so to speak.

KE: Yeah, we do. We do.

CW: Women jumpers.

KE: Yeah. This last time around we did a neat thing. Everybody compiled stories from the different women.

CW: How many gals showed up at the twentieth?

KE: At the twentieth? I think at that time we were saying there'd been like 72 women 9in the twenty years that had gone through the smokejumping, and I think we had something like thirty-something show up.

CW: Did any of them follow up with careers related, like in Fire or aviation, or anything like that?

KE: Yeah. Quite a few, actually.

CW: The ones that showed up were probably the ones that were still in Fire. [Laughs]

KE: Yeah. And actively still in jumping.

CW: Do you know how many women are jumping today?

KE: No, I don't. I don't. It seems to stay about the same. There's usually twelve to sixteen in the system now. Some of the bases have nine, some have none, some have one, some have… I know when I left the Redmond smokejumpers, they had, we had eight. We were actively recruiting. And now I think they're down to two, two rookies, so not keeping up.

CW: Not booming.

KE: Yeah, and they're not recruiting at that base. There's another woman, Margarita Fuller, at the Missoula base, that's been actively recruiting and doing a good job. Kind of one of her main… She's paid by the Washington office to actually [word unclear] for women.

CW: So they're probably going to go there because they might feel more welcome.

KE: Yeah, I think [it makes a] difference. If they can talk to a woman; if there's a bunch of women, you know, it's not a hardship to be there. I spent one year at the base being the only woman, and it's different. It's just different. They were, for the most part, all of them wanted you there. One or two that maybe didn't. [Laughs] I think maybe because they do have the training, you have to go through and make alongside them, you're accepted after that, for the most part.

CW: As long as you can pull your weight as well as the rest of them.

KE: Right. Right. But to be the only one there. You always get teased and…

CW: Very different.

KE: Yes.

CW: So would you say there are any factors these women have in common in their background, that might bring them into this job?

KE: Well I definitely think… That's hard to say, because in men and women you see a wide variety of personalities. Of course you have to like, definitely, to be physical. You just don't get through the program, the training part of it, if you don't enjoy it. You have to like adventure. I'd say that's part of a common thread.

CW: Would you call them adrenaline junkies?

KE: Yeah. Some. [Laughs] Maybe some.

CW: Is there a high percentage of veterans?

KE: Yeah. It's a very, it's probably the best job I've ever had? It's challenging. The camaraderie is probably what keeps a lot of people there. It's a brotherhood/sisterhood. It's got its own culture, even inside of Fire. Fire has its culture, and then I think the jumpers inside of that have a very unique culture too. And that's probably the mainstay of it.

CW: Do you stay in touch with a lot of the people you used to jump with?

KE: Yeah. You run into them on fires. It's always a gush of warm, neat feelings when you see them. Hugs and…

CW: Like family.

KE: yeah, like family. There's some bonds I'll have the rest of my life from that.

CW: Did you have any particular incidents when you were jumping that you'd like to share?

KE: Oh, well. Here we go. [Laughter] The war stories. The jumpers have a saying. They start all their stories with, 'There I was. No shit.' There's one story that's sort of my classic jump story. We all have them. I used to wonder why they taught us how to roll, because over half the time you really didn't land in places where you could do the roll. But I have one story I call my 'Up the Butt' jump. [Laughter] I don't know if you want to hear the whole thing.

CW: Oh yeah!

KE: Well, there I was, no shit. [Laughter] We were down in Redding California, boosting after a lightning storm and thunderstorm. We had gone out on one run. There's usually ten in the plane. I think we were in a twin otter that day. That would be an eight person configuration. Things were just too rough for us to jump. And we looked at the jump country, and some of it was pretty nasty down there in the Shasta-Trinity, rocky and stuff, and it was windy. So we went back to the base, sat around, waited for things to calm down, and went back. And there was a scattering of fires, just all over. So we were intermixed with Redding smokejumpers, and we jumped about three planeloads in one area, and then we were all going to disperse out from those areas hiking to different fires. And on my jump… I jumped with my jump partner, Phil Armor. He is a long-time veteran smokejumper. It was my third year jumping, and I hadn't been real great with the toggles and was getting better. And I thought, I'm just going to follow Phil and I'm going to do what Phil does and get in this jump spot. And so we were coming in, and there were a lot of trees and a lot of high brush under the trees. And we were aiming for the brush. We did not want to get hung up in the trees. The trees were catching a few of the jumpers on the way down. And I managed to toggle in between the trees, and was pretty pleased with myself. And about six feet off the ground I was 'yahoo!' yelling that I had made it through the trees, and all of a sudden the yell turned into 'owww!' And I had come down into the brush; well there was a hidden stab, a broken top of a tree, small tree, that I came right smack dab, sat right down on it. So I was laying the ground rolling, just in pain, and doing the, you know, kind of had a saying then: 'goddam shit fuck'. My partner Phil, he was a quiet man and he didn't know quite what to do. So you know, everything you do in jumping hurts, you know. You pick up a hundred pounds, that hurts; you're

hiking, you're digging, everything hurts. So I rolled around for a little while and got back up. It had gotten… We had got teamed up in teams, and I was with two other Redding jumpers that I didn't know. And we started to hike out to our fire, which was a little ways away, and it got dark. So we stopped and camped. And we were kind of out in a lava field. It got cold that night and we had a little fire, and I kept—top lazy to get up and keep feeding it—I kept going closer and closer to it with my paper sleeping bag.

CW: Oh oh.

KE: And in the morning I woke up and I had a big old burnt hole in my paper sleeping bag that had burned through my sock to my toe. So here I am hobbling along, having been reamed, you know where, and half of a sock. And a couple more hours of walking in this lava rock, which is hard going. We get to our fire, which is only one Ponderosa pine tree in the middle of a sea of lava, and there's a spot about this big [Holds her arms out wide] at the base of it that's kind of black and smoldering a little bit but for the most part out. And I just looked at that and thought, 'I risked my life! Reamed you know where… I can't believe this.' Oh, I know what happened. After getting up in the morning, hiking on the lava rock, a bee started swarming me. I don't know where it was coming from; there was no vegetation. But it got tangled in my hair, and stung me, and I just ballooned; my face. So here I've been reamed up the rear; my face is just like elephant man [CW laughs], and I burned my sock. I'm hobbling along; by the time we got there they just sat me down. They said, 'You just sit here. We'll take care of it.' They were laughing at me and saying, 'We used to think you were cute. [Laughter]

CW: Why didn't you bail out after you were injured? Why didn't you get the heck out of there?

KE: Well I didn't know, you know, how hurt I was. I mean, like I said, everything hurts when you're doing that job, really doing it. We ended up having to pack our gear out too. We kept calling for a helicopter to get gear out, and couldn't get us one. And then as we were hiking out—we hiked 3 ½ miles out—we got to the trailhead, and here comes the helicopter over our heads, going [imitates chopper noise].. "You called?" "Well, you're a little late." [Laughter] And then it hurt to hike out, but it always does. So I really didn't know how injured I was. We kept fighting fire, and about a month later, getting back into a regular running routine after fires, I just couldn't run. And it turned out my hips… I went to the doctor, and he looked at me and just said, "Well, look in the mirror." I felt a little silly, but my hips were off by a couple of inches.

CW: had you broken them?

KE: No. I had just realigned me. He said that would have taken a lot of force. And I said, "Well, I think I know what it was." [Laughs]

CW: Well, did he line them back up?

KE: Yeah. It was a series of working with the chiropractor.

CW: Was that the worst injury you had?

KE: No, my first year, I think it was my second jump, the jaws of a rock got me. I came in, and just as I was hitting the ground my toe just barely caught this rock. I called in "Jaws". It looked like, sharp, jagged. It just barely caught my toe and snapped my ankle, and actually just ripped up the ligaments. So that put me out the rest of the season. But other than that, in my ten years, those were my two worst injuries. I always thought, if I ever get injured, that's it. But it becomes just a part of the job, kind of. It's the norm, once or twice in your career to get injured, taken off the list, as we say.

CW: There's still a lot of [words inaudible] on a daily basis on that crew.

KE: Well actually, it's pretty amazing. We train, we're so physically fit. I mean, that's why you're physically fit; you withstand a lot more injuries than if you didn't. And they have an amazing record of… their injury record is actually pretty low for what they do.

CW: Was anyone seriously injured or killed while you were jumping?

KE: Yeah. A Missoula jumper. We were changing, trying to train from our round parachutes. The Forest Service uses round, and BLM uses square parachutes; ram air parachutes. We were trying to train to get to the ram airs, and we had [word inaudible] Billy Martin, killed in Missoula at a ram air training. He was from the Missoula area.

CW: That would have been about '80?

KE: I think that might have been more in the '90s. Right around '90.

CW: So did you prefer them, once you switched?

KE: Well, we ended up… The Washington office, after that fatality, just said 'No, we're staying with…" The ram airs had a lot more malfunctions. The rounds are pretty infallible, for the most part. So we didn't continue training on them. To this day the Forest Service still jumps the round parachutes.

CW: Was there much change [Interrupted by an intercom announcement] Was there much change in technology while you were jumping, in terms of the equipment that you had?

KE: Not a whole lot. Towards the end of my career they were trying to re-design the round, and they did actually get them designed to where there was different sizes of parachutes for different weights; you know, small, medium and large. And then, after, just right as I left, they had designed them to have more forward speed momentum. Basically they kept trying to make a round a square, but that doesn't work. You can only go so far with that. Other than that, we kept trying, we… If you ever visit a jumper base, they have a huge sewing room where we make all of our own gear, our jumpsuits out of Kevlar…

CW: Make your own?

KE: Yeah, make our own jumpsuits; make all of our own packs. You know, our large, pack-out bags, our line gear and then repairing our parachutes. We kept trying to re-design the [word inaudible]. You always want every little ounce you can get off of something, and… [Shrugs] The job's pretty basic. Pretty hard. I'm waiting for the day they come up with the little jet packs that pick you up. A little jetson jet pack. [Laughs]

CW: Maybe. I like that.

KE: Some way to get that weight out of the woods.

CW: So you always pack your own chute?

KE: No, you're licensed by F.A.A. You have to be licensed to pack parachutes. And most all the jumpers do get licensed, and parachutes just go into the packing room, and you just grab a parachute. Not necessarily your own. And you have to label who packs the parachute, you have to put your name on it. So if you kind of knew somebody wasn't as meticulous as somebody else, [Mimes looking over the parachutes] you knew the names to grab. [CW laughs] Or you could grab your own. But you didn't necessarily pack your own.

CW: So ten years. Is that a pretty typical length of time for a jumper to, for her career?

KE: There's people that are there longer and there's people that are there shorter. I would say probably six to eight years, five to eight years is more of a typical time. And there's people that have been there their whole careers

CW: Twenty years?

KE: Or more. More.

CW: They don't make… Well, there is a mandatory retirement at some point.

KE: Fifty-seven in Fire, and there's people that make it. That's happening more and more than it used to. But I think in jumping, if you don't go out your first year, if you get over the fears of tree-climbing and the jump, you've worked so hard to be there and the camaraderie is so great, most people are in there for at least five years. Five to six years. There might be one or two that goes out earlier, but it's such a compelling job.

CW: you probably have one of the longer terms, for a woman, in Fire. Ten years.

KE: A little bit, yeah. But there's some women that have, a couple that have been there… actually more than a couple now. Three, four, that have had long careers. There's one gal, Robin, I think she has about seventeen years. Renee [Lamereau], just got out of the Redmond base, I think she's been there fourteen years Maragrita Phillips, long time. Casey Rhodes. There's a few that have stayed in it.

CW: What made you decide to change from jumping to [word inaudible].

KE: Well, there I was, no shit. [Laughs] I always tell this little funny story as part of it, but. I was getting, nearing forty. Not really feeling forty; I felt pretty good. We had this one guy comes up. He had transferred from the Redding base, and he'd been there a couple weeks, and I'd been conversing with him. And I always felt like I was right in there with everybody else, but one day he said to somebody, "What's that older woman's name?" [Laughs] It was like, Oh my God, this is reality of… Older woman? I don't feel older. I thought he was like, my age. But it just started to be that these incoming jumpers, you were like their parents' age. [Laughs] And I did, I turned forty and just started, "Wow. This is a career." I mean, I never had really intended, thought of it as a career. I started realizing that, Hey, age 50. You can retire in firefighter retirement. So I thought I'd better start looking at it as a career, and I didn't have the confidence that I could make it, physically, to age 50. My body was getting run done and I had a running injury for three years, and so it was hard for me to train between. And I think I was getting ready to do something different. There was definitely a grieving period, a sense of loss, when I left there. I'm not sure it was the right thing to do in some senses. [Laughs] Now that I'm healed, I think I probably could have physically stayed in there, but…

CW: Been one of those long term women?

KE: Yeah. But I'm satisfied. It was perfect.

CW: What is the GS level that jumpers do today? Can they go up indefinitely, or is it still stuck?

KE: There's a real sharp pyramid in it. You come in as a 5. The next year you usually get a 6. And then you stay at that 6 level until, there's… I forget, there's probably four or five or six squad leaders, they call them, at that 7 level. So out of—at the Redmond base there's thirty-five, and there's four or five squad leaders. And then there was loft foremen, two 9s, and then the manager, an 11. So it's a very, very sharp pyramid and it got really competitive. If we had any problems, it revolved around that. About why didn't I get that, or why did he or she get that. You stay there for the job, you don't stay there… of course, everybody's there for the money, but they make their money by working lots of overtime. I think that's probably one reason I left too, I was just tired of being tired. We were working year 'round, going nationally. When our fire season wasn't here, we were in the South, helping them burn, picking up their fires. The jumpers now go to New York and Chicago, and climb trees in the cities.

CW: Wow. So it's not just jumping.

KE: Yeah, they do just all kinds of project work nationally. We were up into the thousand hours overtime a year, year after year. And it's hard to maintain a family life and relationships.

CW: Is there a high divorce rate in the jumper cadre?

KE: There's a little bit, but it's probably not as high as you might expect. There's probably more just single people. [Laughs] There's definitely families.

CW: Was it during that period that you built your log cabin in the Bend area?

KE: Yeah. Uh huh. Well, I started it prior to jumping. Lived in a teepee on our property. That was when I was on the engine. Started it then. And it was a slow process, it was as you got money and as you had time. And I think it was about in 1986, when I started jumping, that I moved in. And it's still not done. [Laughs] It's just real hard, being in Fire, to do that.

CW: During the [mountain] snow season?

KE: Yeah.

CW: So you didn't buy a kit, you built it log by log?

KE: Log by log. Got the last log house permit on the Rogue River. Transported the logs behind a little Ford Courier. Kind of an amazing little system. We had 30 footers behind. Carrying one 30 footer at a time. We'd get stopped by the state police, troopers, every time. They couldn't understand our system until they saw it. Well, you're legal.

CW: Another adventure.

KE: Another adventure.

CW: So what job did you take after jumping?

KE: After jumping I went over to where I am now, actually: the Detroit-Sweethome Forest on the Willamette, and became the AFMO there. At that time they only had one assistant fire management officer. And I did both fuels and fire suppression. And that was almost nine years ago—eight and a half years ago—and right now I'm the acting Fire Management Officer.

CW: And hoping to be the new Fire Management Officer.

KE: Hoping to be the new Fire Management Officer.

CW: Could you still have the opportunity to go away on project fires? Are you part of a team?

KE: I've been on the Northwest Type II team. And this year I am not going with the m, just because my boss retired and I moved up. We had another AFMO— the [emphasis] other AFMO— retire, so we had two new AFMOs to detail; getting them all up to snuff, and I'm learning this new job; so I was pretty much told, "You're not going this year." [Laughs] I miss that.

CW: Do you know any other women, former jumpers, who are in a position similar to that you have in Fire?

KE: I'm trying to think. Yes, there has been a couple of them that have been AFMOs. Deanne [Schulman] actually—she's the first gal jumper—she has a neat job that I envy. [Laughs] She does international fire work. And Robin Embry, who I mentioned earlier, she's probably the

longest-time jumping gal, she is I think the loft foreman at the Yellowstone, no, the Grangeville, Idaho base. And then the various other ones are in fuels and fire.

CW: You could be the first jumper who becomes an FMO.

KE: Gosh, that's a question that's… I'm not thinking off the top of my head that's there's been any other gal. There's been other men that have become fire Management officers.

CW: Okay, well, I'll do the research on that.

KE: We have one gal, Diane Price, that she holds the air attacks job as her primary job.

CW: Did you ever have a desire to fly planes yourself, or helicopters?

KE: No. I hate the landings. [Laughs] It was always weird to be in the plane. Every once in a while, if they didn't jump the plane out, every once in a while the pilot would let you come up and be in the seat next to them. That was prior to the days… now they have co-pilots on the jump planes, but before they didn't used to. It always made me nervous on the landings 'cause I was used to jumping. [Laughs]

CW: You'd been gone by then.

KE: No, I've thought about it. I haven't done anything about it. There's been other jumpers that actually… Some of the lead lane pilots. Some of our jumper pilots have been former jumpers.

CW: Do you ever jump for recreation?

KE: No.

CW: Not interested?

KE: No. It's really interesting. There's not many jumpers that do. When I was in the system I think there was only about three that I knew of, nationally, who did it as a recreation. Now there's a few more that do the gliding. Paragliding. Actually I know one ex-smokejumper who's 70-some years old, that I met. I was doing air attack on a [word unclear] fire a couple years ago over on the Siskiyou, and hanging out at the airport. And this guy, ex-smokejumper, 76, 78 years old, was doing the ultra-light. He was a unique man. I can't imagine. I hope I have that spunk at that age. [Laughs]

CW: Is there much opportunity in the course of your job to be involved with the local communities? Either while on a private fire or in your regular job?

KE: Right now? Well of course with the local community you are if you're in the urban interface. I've done a lot, well not a lot of that. Jumping we used to go down to California in the late season. Down to Malibu if it was burning, or Ojai, and get involved with the community. Actually I really don't like that kind of fire. [Laughs] It's too emotional.

CW: People come up to you upset, begging you to do something?

KE: Yeah, either that or they're just overwhelmed with thanks. I don't like watching people's homes burn. I like being there and being able to do something about it.

CW: Awkward.

KE: Yeah.

CW: Let the public affairs people take care of that.

KE: Yeah.

CW: Do you do any mentoring now, in terms of bringing young people up in the organization?

KE: Yep. I think that's probably the thing I like about my job. I have the opportunity to do that, and that's what I feel the best about. I think, when I came to the North Zone, myself, and we had another individual, male, who had been on hot shot crews and jumping come in at the same time. And I think we were able to structure the suppression program a little bit more like a Type 1, and we sent quite a few people to hotshots and smokejumper bases. That's always rewarding. They go on and they get jazzed. It's just so important now, after all the fatalities, to have a very high sense of responsibility in how we train them and how we mentor them. It's a little scary. I used to pray for those fires, and now it's like, "Oh, send 'em home."

CW: Did you feel like there's a change in the fire organization since you've been a part of it?

KE: oh yeah. Definitely.

CW: In what way?

KE: I think we're trying to get more professional. Unfortunately, the thing that has driven that is the fatalities. There's a lot more structure, you know, qualifications; a lot more training. In my opinion we have a ways to go. We're making great effort, but it comes down t the bottom line is money. And until the Congress decides to fund it, it's pretty hard to make a professional organization out of half the people or more than half the people being part-time. Seasonal work.

CW: it's hard to keep up a professional force?

KE: Yeah, and it's hard to make all the qualifications and everything. Get them all trained up. You know, we're spitting them out in the middle of the fire season now. So much to do. And then we send them off to other jobs in the winter. There's a lot of training that could go on then.

CW: Do you think, in your opinion is the National Fire Plan taking us in the right direction?

KE: Yeah. It's all an evolution, and that has to go on. As we build into our wild lands, more and more we're going to see more homes go up, and…

CW: So do you think there should be an emphasis on fuel reduction, especially in the urban interface?

KE: Yeah. Oh yeah. I'm just amazed it doesn't get tied, or more enforced… and that's where we're headed. We've got some mandates at state level. It's just getting it implemented; it takes time and money and people. And we're not there. We aren't on that part yet. But people are mandated in their building to take care of their properties that way, but do we really have the workforce to make sure, to monitor that? That's what I don't see happening, in my local area where I live.

CW: Is there any, is there increased communication with the local fire departments? Is that part of the National Fire Plan?

KE: I think that helps. With all of the grant processes, that's how we're getting some of the work done, is the grants going through some of them.

CW: And that's a good thing?

KE: Yeah.

CW: You have pretty different training levels, wouldn't you say?

KE: That's getting more and more intertwined. At least with the wildland part of it.

CW: And the state of Oregon has always been more similar to the way you're trained.

KE: No, not actually. But all the agencies are starting to mesh, I think starting… Maybe starting, I think BLM and the Forest Service have meshed a lot further; states meshing in there. We're getting there. It's getting more unified. It's kind of neat.

CW: Well, is there anything—we're close to the end of our tape—that I didn't mention, that you would like to share?

KE: More money. [Laughs]

CW: Send more money, Washington D.C. [Laughs]

KE: Yeah. I truly believe that at the heart of our problems… It's so hard to do the job anymore, with [word inaudible] so much. The money's just not coming along with it, and positions coming along with it. As part of the Forest Service we're mandated to downsize, and our business is growing. And we're downsizing. You can't do it all. And that starts into the human factor side of, you know, why we're still having fatalities, in my opinion. I would like to see the fire service

grow. We have to get beyond where we're at. Tasking everybody with more and more, but with less and less.

CW: Do you think pretty highly of the Forest Service as a fire organization, overall?

KE: Yeah, I do. I think we all do the best we can, and do a really good job for what we're given. We've been slandered for Can-Do attitude, but you have to have one to make it work. I was thinking about that this morning. We train people to be Can-Do, and it's sort of a battle, because on one hand we're saying "Do it, do it, do it, yeah!" and then the next thing we're saying, "But watch that Can-Do attitude."

CW: Don't go overboard.

KE: Yeah. But it's so good that I've been a part of it. It's been a great, adventuresome career. I don't think I'd change it.

CW: you're not sorry, are you?

KE: What?

CW: Not sorry you got involved?

KE: Not sorry at all. Get tired from time to time.

CW: Get plenty of rest.

KE: Yeah.

CW: Okay, I guess. Thank you very much.

KE: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW