

Gathering Our Voice

Interview with Bob and Wanita Shank, Columbia Breaks

Interviewer: Chris Mallon

Date of Interview: October 4, 2009

Transcribed February 20, 2011 by Jo Stiles, AmeriCorps Volunteer

Chris Mallon: Okay, this is Chris Mallon and I'm interviewing Bob and Wanita Shank, October 4th, 2009. Thank you very much for being here to share with us today. First I'll ask you some introductory questions. Bob, how long have you lived in the Entiat Valley?

Bob Shank: Going on seventy years.

CM: And Wanita, how long have you lived in the valley?

Wanita Shank: Eighty-one years.

CM: All your life?

JS: Yes.

CM: Bob, how did you come here?

BS: I drove here.

CM: And so your journey was in 1940.

BS: Yes.

CM: What do you remember most vividly from your journey here?

BS: I had relatives here. And I wasn't working at the time where I was. I come here on the weekend and I went to work on a Monday.

(voices whispering in the background)

CM: Bob, how have you made a living in this region over the years?

BS: Well, as a heavy equipment operator, and I worked for the Chelan Highway Department. Also heavy equipment operator.

CM: For the mill?

BS: For the mill and county both.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: What has been your experience with fire management in the Entiat Valley? Have you done fire fighting?

BS: I've been on every major fire in the Entiat except the one on '94. I was right here.

CM: And your experience with fire in the valley, unlike some people we've interviewed, you weren't in the forest service.

BS: No

CM: So, how did you come to be fighting fire?

BS: At that time the Forest Service had a contract on their timber sale that when they needed fire fighters they could get their crews and their equipment. And that's how I wound up fightin' fires.

2:47

CM: Okay, we're going to delve some more into the topic of fire management in the Entiat Valley and North Central Washington. We're interested in how people have responded to change in the forest over time.

BS: Well, with me it's been good when I started. And up to this day and age it isn't too good.

CM: So, as far as the forest for economy? How have forests and fire management in the Entiat Valley changed over the time that you've seen?

BS: Well, that's basically the same. Only some of the younger people comin' up don't know as much as the older people about fire. And that's about the about only change.

CM: What about the forests themselves? What were the forests like when you first got here?

BS: Well, I never paid much attention to them because I was always workin' on timber sales. And the company had timber sales all over. Even clear up in the Twisp River country. I worked on all of them, every place.

CM: So your mill here...oh, so you would be hired by other mills anywhere. Is that how you ended up seeing in Twisp too?

BS: No, we was always hired out through our company... in relation to timber sales.

CM: And that company was ...

BS: Harris. C. A. Harris and Son.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: Okay. And over time, you say, you've worked on every fire in the Entiat Valley. About how often were you having to do firefighting over the years since 1940?

BS: Well, one of the big fires in 1970 I spent twenty-one days on it.

CM: And then, that fire was pretty widespread, wasn't it?

BS: Yeah, but it wasn't near as widespread as the '94 fire. But that was a good fire.

CM: And it was widespread enough to have some economic impact?

BS: Well, yeah. It burned up several homes.

CM: And, for the Harris Mill? Did it impact that much?

6:06

BS: No, it didn't burn up one of their timber sales.

CM: Getting... bringing us back to the topic of fire management in the Entiat. Do you have one particular memory you can share that would help others envision the changes you've seen over time?

BS: Well, I can't think of any particular one right now. No.

(indistinguishable voices in the background)

CM: We're just commenting on the airplane that just went over. They're doing some controlled burning upriver and they're probably are calling for air support.

We have another category about learning about fire. How did you learn to deal with forest fires over time. Did you ever fight fire before you came here? To Entiat Valley?

BS: Yeah.

CM: So, even when you were back in Idaho or Northeastern Washington you've had experience with fire?

BS: Well, not so much directly on the fire, but on the Nezperce fire in Idaho I had four mules and a saddle horse that I packed water on that fire. I was just a fifteen year old kid.

CM: Would it be fair to say that you learned from experience?

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

BS: Yep.

CM: Because now if you're working for the Forest Service fighting fire, you get specific training. But you said that all...the mill had a contract to go out and fight, say, when you were in the Entiat, so you would just...

BS: Well, when you went on a major fire in the Entiat, the people knew ya and knew what you could do. And they wouldn't take a greenhorn and put him on a job he couldn't do. Took a man that knew what he was doing to a specific job.

CM: I remember you telling me one time, but you'll have to tell the real story, there was a lightning strike in the North Fork, was it up by Fern Lake? And, I don't know what year it was or what your employment was at the time, but didn't you have to hike in there? And was it at night or ...

BS: ?

CM: by yourself? Or...

BS: And the trailhead at that time was right at the bottom of the Entiat Valley.

CM: Oh.

BS: There's no road up there or anything.

CM: So you hiked up into the Entiat Valley up into the North Fork drainage?

BS: Up to Fern Lake.

CM: And, did you have anybody with you?

BS: Her brother Bob Stanaway.

CM: And all you had was...

BS: Backpack, our tools and we didn't even have food with us. They would fly the food in, in morning and evening for us.

CM: So that's a big change over time.

BS: Yeah, well what I didn't like about it they was they would drop all the silverware to another fire, then they'd drop all the cups to us.

(laughter)

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: That's like a story somebody else told us on this interview. About whoever...they were able to drive things in, but whichever crew got the truck first would take whatever they wanted off, and by the time it got to the last person, you probably just had silverware.

You know with your experience over time and fires and how you used to go up for the mill and until '94 and when you had to have training, you've seen a lot of fire. Forest fires. What worked and what didn't work from your point of view?

(10:45)

BS: Well, I've been on a couple of fires that, for instance Gold Ridge fire. I've run building fire line with a D-8. The main fire was pretty hot. But they started a backfire that got bigger than the main fire. And then we had to fight that fire. And that was mismanagement.

CM: And were ...it seems like if you were hiking in or back in the woods a lot... were these lightning caused fires?

BS: Yes.

CM: And, how'd you know where they were?

BS: Well, we had directions from (?) at that time. We had radios. We could call the lookout and he'd give us the location of where the fire was. Then when we got so close we could see the smoke or smell it, and get to it before it got to any more than about a half acre.

CM: And this year 2009 I can think of three lookouts. Steliko, Tyee, Sugar Loaf. Were there more when you were depending on information?

BS: There was all those that you mentioned, plus Cougar Mountain, Klone Peak, and Stormy Mountain. And I guess...Steliko.

CM: I said Steliko. So Cougar Mountain, Klone Peak, Stormy Mountain, Tyee, Steliko, and Sugar Loaf. So that's six.

BS: Yeah.

12:59

CM: Does Big Hill count?

BS: What?

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: Does Big Hill count or count more for the Chelan side?

BS: Well, we didn't have much contact with Big Hill. They watched part of the Entiat. And if you was in that part of the Entiat on a spot fire then you contacted Big Hill.

CM: But, like say, your Fern Lake fire

BS: Pyramid, one or the other

CM: Oh, so Pyramid had lookout too.

BS: Yeah.

CM: But then the Fern Lake fire could have been spotted from Tyee? They have a viewing.

BS: No. I don't think so.

CM: So they might have communicated to.... What would you define good stewardship down here in the Valley?

BS: Well, I don't know. I really don't know

CM: That's a popular term these day and people of your generation, you just took care of what was there, I guess.

BS: We took care of what was there with what we had.

CM: And so taking care of land, those values, how were they passed to you, or learned?

BS: I don't know. I couldn't tell ya.

CM: Must be just from living life. Has your notion of stewardship changed over time? What you've seen, or thought about, or how you've done...

BS: Yeah, I've changed. Changed some all right from back then to now.

CM: In terms of cooperation, and Wanita you can chime in here too, can you tell me about where people gathered in your community as you spent time here from 1940 on?

BS: Ya mean . . .

CM: Just

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

BS: Ya mean parties and stuff?

CM: Yes, just community get-togethers and ...

BS: Well they had a, right down there by the county's office, they had a roller rink and a dance hall. And everybody gathered there to roller skate, party and dance, and stuff like that.

CM: And at some point that wasn't there anymore? That community hall?

BS: The community hall fell in one heavy winter.

CM: Do you remember what year that was?

BS: It was when I was gone.

CM: Oh, in the Navy?

BS: Yeah.

CM: So, Wuanita after that what did they use?

WS: We went from house to house.

CM: You went from house to house?

WS: Uh huh.

CM: Travel was a lot harder when you were growing up, wasn't it?

WS: Yes.

CM: So you pretty much stuck closer to home?

WS: Uh huh.

CM: When did they start using the big school house for some things?

JS: That's when the kids were transferred to Entiat. Our grade school was transferred to Entiat. And then it was used for community...

CM: Did you ..but you finished grade school here at the White School?

WS: Uh huh.

CM: At Ardenvoir , so when you were at high school the grade school was absorbed down at Entiat... in the forties, or was it later than that?

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

WS: Later.

CM: OK.

(background voices)

JS: Bob went to first grade in Entiat.

CM: Your Bob? Your Bob Stanaway.

WS: No, our son.

CM: Oh, your son.

WS: Yes. So, and that's the year it was transferred.

CM: What brought people together when you had these gatherings? What kind of activities did people do together when they went house to house? Or what groups did people create?

17:44

BS: Well, we played music. We had waffle parties.

WS: Bands. Bands. Bands. I thought they loved the bands.

BS: And stuff like that. And if you was in a place that was big enough the kids had ball games. And at night it...there was usually waffle parties.

CM: Weren't there some activities around horses too?

BS: The saddle club. They was always pretty active with the horse part of it. Sports, basketball games, trail riding.

CM: That was the group that got together... was brought together by people who were interested in horses.

BS: Started out in Entiat. And they called it the A M E. And then they separated. And the saddle club formed separately from them. But we still get together.

CM: Yeah.

BS: The other club was the square dance club. And we played for a lot of their square dances.

CM: So you were around to play music and Les Shank was around to play music ..

BS: Goodell, all the Goodells played. I don't know. There was a lot of musicians in the country.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

WS: Dan McCord.

BS: And we just took turns, ya know. We wouldn't the whole twenty of us all get together and play at once. There'd be three or four...two or three. And like that.

CM: Then you could take turns dancing too?

BS: Yep.

CM: What was the community response to fires? You mentioned that the mill...or Grant mentioned that orchardists came in and helped. Were there different roles for men and women?

BS: Yes, where they had fire camps women worked.

CM: Did you ever work in a fire camp?

WS: Yes.

BS: What year?

WS: 1970.

CM: What did you have to do?

WS: Cook.

CM: How long did that go on?

BS: I don't know, it was several days after I got done.

WS: And then I helped clean up. So it was a couple of weeks.

CM: So everybody pitched in?

WS: Uh huh.

CM: What do you both appreciate most about the Entiat?

BS: Oh, I don't know. I always thought it was a pretty good place to be according to some of the other places I've been.

CM: So would that be how it looks, what there was to do?

BS: Yeah, it looked a lot different before we had these big fires, where everything was green and nice, and after that, well, to me it didn't look too good.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: Well, what about you Wanita?

WS: A good place to raise the three kids. And they went to school in Entiat. And it was not a real good school, but I told the kids to learn as much as you can. And so they did and they all three of them went on to college. All three have good jobs so schooling was my main...

CM: What makes you feel connected to this community?

BS: Too dad-blamed old to move.

(laughter)

WS: I'd move tomorrow if I could.

CM: But you would have wanted to move away if you couldn't stand the people.

WS: It's not the people. It's...I'm tired of same ole, same ole.

CM: How would you describe Entiat to other people?

BS: I would never try it. Really, I don't know enough about Entiat, what goes on down there because it never interests me.

CM: You're too busy up here. With everyday life.

23:20

CM: How did fire in the Entiat Valley affect your ability to make a living here?

BS: Well, it didn't affect anything as to ... when it come to fire, it had to be taken care of. And we all jumped at it and took care of it. And then we went back to our ordinary jobs.

CM: Eventually the mill closed. Was that in 1980?

BS: No, 1970.

CM: Okay. Was that partly due to fire or other things?

BS: Well, yeah that. And probably a little bit of mismanagement. And he spread himself out too far, buying timber out of the country and it cost so much to log it and get it here. And he was getting to... they were getting pretty well up in age too, and they just sold out to Pack River.

CM: Okay, so they, Harrises, sold up to Pack River in 1970, And then Pack River kept working. And then were they the last owners or was it W I that bought that?

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

BS: Pack River was the last owner. And they finally logged what they could get and shut it down.

CM: In what ways do you, Bob and Wanita, feel your family and your work have contributed to the community? Life and spirit of this place?

BS: I don't know.

CM: You've helped a lot of families here. We were (helped).

BS: Well, we helped the people that we could, you know. What they didn't know and we knew, we helped them, different ones, started with what they're doing.

CM: Help like that helps people succeed who come after you. And that's why they're still here.

(laughter)

CM: The last topic is hoping. Hoping for the future. What conditions or circumstances in the Entiat give you hope regarding fires in the future.

BS: Well in the future, at the age I am, I hope I can get out of the way if it happens.

(laughter)

CM: Well, that was a pretty dramatic event when the '94 fire came and you were right here in this house.

BS: That's right.

CM: When it happened.

BS: And you didn't know if you was going to lose everything or just part of it.

CM: Because you were ...you were still growing hay at the time. And on Sunday, whatever day in July that lightning struck, you and your neighbors, the Mallons, were all sitting out there when the hay went up in the barn. And we all heard the...

BS: We all saw it.

CM: ... the lightning strike. And then two days later, on Tuesday, we were sitting. No, on Wednesday, we were sitting down here in the yard because the fire had gone up over the ridge into the Upper Mud Creek. But this had not burned on Wednesday. And you were sitting here at this house.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

BS: The one that had caused us to burn here come the other side of the river. And then it jumped the river right down here, oh, a hundred yards or so, and then come around the hill. And then this one come over the top and then the wind come from that part and this fire caused a fierce wind.

CM: And you...we were, my husband and I and you and Wanita were sitting here in the lull at lunch time when all this activity suddenly flared up really fast. You and your nephew, was it your nephew Doug?

BS: Yeah Doug Stanway.

CM: ..and Mike were up in the barn. What were you doing up there?

BS: Oh, we were afraid of spark. We figured the fire would just burn around the hill. And instead of burnin' around the hill, it got caught in this vortex and it roared around the hill. It just caught the whole thing on fire and we just had to leave it.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: So you guys left the barn?BS: Left the barn. And we all come right back here in the yard.

CM: And Wanita and I were in the pickup truck because you had loaded it up with some of your belongings that you didn't want to be in the house in case it burned.

29:27

BS: Yeah, I loaded it up with a bag of black powder behind the front seat ahead of the back seat. And I covered it up and I told Wanita to take the pickup across the road and park it. Roll the windows up, and don't roll those windows down. Nobody knew what was there but me until afterwards.

CM: And when Wanita and I were standing over there with the pickup all this happened. And what did you see when Wanita? 'Cause all I remember is a big roar of sound. And I remember that a truck lowboy with bulldozer pulled up in front of the house and backed off. Do you remember that? He backed off into the street, came up your driveway and plowed over a bush that was near a structure. And it saved some more of your buildings.

BS: What he done. I had a, the garage wasn't there then, and I had another combination shop and a garage that had a camper in. Well, it was burning. (Unintelligible) Well, he got in and pushed up over to where the barn was burning. That saved the whole thing.

CM: And that's when we were standing in the road. And what do you remember Wanita?

WS: Do you mean about the big tree?

CM: Well, were you aware of that big huge noise about the fire?

WS: Oh yes, you couldn't hear.

CM: I mean, I was just shocked.

WS: Yes, and then the big tree, that was kind of a marked spot for the Stanaway Ranch. And it lit up just like a Christmas tree. The whole thing was, it was beautiful if it hadn't been so bad. And that made me really sad.

And then a man came up to the side of the pickup when I was in it and told me to roll down the windows and head down, but it was still on fire down. But I told him I'm not going to do it. That if I'm going anyplace I'm going back where it's already burned.

CM: Yes, the upriver had burned the day before.

JS: Yeah. So anyway, that was my experience with the fire.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

CM: I don't know how long that took but it seemed awfully fast. 'Cause I didn't watch the tree that you're talking about burn, I just saw spots happening up there and the next thing you know everything around us was burning, and people, you could hardly hear them yelling. You could hardly hear that big bulldozer.

BS: That all took place in a matter of minutes. And when we were out here, between the garage and the house, and I looked up and you could see fire a good three hundred feet in the air just going like that. Just roaring.

CM: And I remember being with Wanita when you said to go down river. Well we were watching this fire race up that bank right there. There's no way, by the road. I mean you'd have to drive right next to it. We didn't even know the black powder was in there. But she was smart enough to know we should go upriver instead of down to get into black space.

BS: Well, I wanted to get it out of the house. Because if the house would have went and there was firefighters around I had enough black powder there to scatter them from heck to breakfast. And so I got it out of there and put it in a rig that could be transported...and covered it up. As long as no spark got to it, it was fine.

WS: No way did I roll down the window.

CM: Well I felt sad about that tree because you were telling me right there at the spot, something about the tree.

WS: Yeah. We had a swing in it.

CM: And later how old did you find out that tree was?

BS: They had counted, when they cut it, they counted the growth rings from the heart...out...and when he got out to 325 he couldn't count anymore because they were so close together.

CM: Wow. Way over 325 years old. A fir tree, correct?

WS: Yeah.

35:07

CM: Well, is there anything else you wanted to share?

BS: Not that I know of. Just hope it gets back green again.

CM: Well, thank you for your time. We appreciate your involvement. And we will give you a copy of the transcript later in the year.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org

WS: Thank you.

Suggested citation:

Gathering Our Voice, 2009, Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship, www.gatheringourvoice.org