Oral Interview with
Robert A. Mitchell
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Robert A. Mitchell retired from the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in 1976. This interview was conducted at his home near Kalispell, Montana.

AW: Bob, let's start off with a little of your earlier history, where you were born and your school days.

RM: I was born on a homestead in eastern Montana, on July 21, 1913. I was born in a sod house, which I don't think there are too many Montanans left who have that distinction.

AW: There aren't many people anywhere who have that distinction of being born in a sod house.

RM: My Dad and Mother homesteaded and did fine until they got the first crop and the thrashing outfit pulled in October to thrash and it was still sitting there the next spring because the night it came there was a snowstorm and it ruined their life's work.

AW: It never got used the whole year?

RM: No, they never got a crop. So, Dad was the railroad depot operator before that for the Great Northern at Brockton and so he went back to railroading and I spent most of my early life in Paradise, Montana where I went to grade school.

Then, they didn't have a high school at Paradise at the time I started as a freshman so the school district paid us money to go to school someplace else. So I ended up going to high school in Anaconda, Montana.

AW: Was that without your folks -- you went off on your own to high school?

RM: Yes. I kind of made it on my own quite a bit. During the Depression I came back and was trying to go to college in Missoula and got a year in there working for my board and room and checking my books out from the library every two weeks.

AW: You couldn't afford to buy textbooks?

RM: That's right. So, anyway, I couldn't make it any longer, they wanted some money and I didn't have it and when you're doing dishes for your board and room and walking from the Northern Pacific Depot twice a day out to the university and back, it was a battle. So, that was during the Depression, 1931. I started out trying to find a job and I couldn't find work. I did the summer a little bit, anything. Come fall, I went over to where my folks were living, in Washington at that time, and the railroad had cut down and my Dad was out of work and CCC came along. I signed up for that so I could spend my time, earn $25 a month and get $5 for myself for my cigarette money and entertainment. That worked out real good. I got a good education there. There was 225 young fellows there in the same position I was and we worked together and helped each other and learned as much as I could. I learned how to work, that was the thing. Anyhow, after that, I came back and my folks were still living in eastern Washington and when I got out of the CCC's I came back there and went to work. I got a chance to go to work as a back hammer operator.

In the meantime I got acquainted with a young lady and we got married in 1935 and started making a living. I had a pretty good job with a warehouse company and then I went to work with a manufacturing company and they ended up sending me to a new plant they were opening in Illinois. I put in five years there but Montana still called me. So we moved back to Montana in 1947 and I went hunting for a job. A friend of mine was running the fish hatchery at Anaconda and I went to see if he had anything. He put me to work the next day. It wasn't a very big operation -- had a manager, an assistant manager and myself. That winter I learned how to take care of small fish, eggs, learned how to spawn. The process of getting a job with the department in those days was just you knew someone, you appeared and you got hired. You didn't fill out an application, or go through an interview process or any of that stuff like you do today. The second day on the job the superintendent of Fisheries made a visit to the hatchery, which he had run for a good many years before he was superintendent. And, my boss introduced me to him and he looked at me and said, "He looks like he can work." That was the only recommendation I had. That was in 1947.

I stayed there, I was, well, I don't know if you call it lucky or unlucky, but I came to work the same time they started hiring fisheries biologists. I was with the hatchery system, which was all old-timers all over the state. These hatchery biologists came in and they were a new breed of guys. They had an education in what they were supposed to be doing and we didn't. And there was a war started. But I was caught

between the two. I could see these young guys had something on the ball. And it was quite a battle for several years until they finally got straightened around and began to work as a team. It's understandable when somebody's been doing a job for a number of years and someone else comes in with a different set of ideas and what you're doing is wrong.

AW: That's right.

RM: You don't want to believe that you're wrong. I started before you did, in 1951, and there seems to be another reason for friction. Friction between the two--that was when the federal aid money started. And all of a sudden the biologists came in, and they had money, they could buy a new vehicle, they could buy new equipment, where the hatcheries had been working for years on a shoestring trying to save money

AW: That's right. Here some guy comes in with more equipment, more education, and almost no experience and tells you you're doing the wrong thing. I can understand exactly what happened.

RM: I was ambitious all the time and I've never learned how to say no when somebody's wanting me to go and help them do something. It paid off in the long run.

AW: The first biologist you had anything to do with in 1947 was this one from the forest service, Ray West, who had been loaned to the department. The department didn't have a fish biologist then.

RM: Ray West had a planting program that was a huge thing. They planted every water; they went by the map, any body of water they could see with a name they put a planting program on it. The hatcheries raised billions of fry and planted them in all directions. Anytime they could get a sportsman's club or outfitter or anything to plant them then they made a lot of mistakes.

AW: I remember looking at those five-year plans when I first started out and it seems to be the only criteria was that the water had to have trout in it. If it had trout in it, it got planted with trout. That's what they went by and some of them didn't even know if they had trout in them or not.

RM: No, they had no way of knowing what trout was where. They wouldn't do it. I went to Ovando we had a small fish hatchery in Ovando that just run part time. I went up there with a couple of truck loads of fish and got outfitters in the valley there to plant where they took their guests fishing. So, that was the way the planting was done. It

went from no science on it at all to a good program that is workable and making a good fisheries for the people of Montana.

In the meantime, we had this feud going and we had a scuffle with the superintendent and he retired. They hired Walt Allen, who was a federal man, which was a good thing. If they would have hired somebody out of the hatchery system or somebody out of the biologists, it would have just increased the war. He was in the middle and he did a good job with keeping the thing from blowing out and he made a good unit out of it. So, it was--. They worked. People got to working together a little bit. I think the first big one that come along was the Marias River. It wasn't the best project in the world but it settled the hatchery and biologist into one unit. And they had to work together.

AW: Yes, you and I were both in that campaign of working together and living in not the very best quarters, do you want to describe some of the places you lived when you worked on the Marias?

RM: Well, we lived in the airport to start with.

AW: Cut Bank airport.

RM: Cut Bank airport. And they had a little concession stand there so we would take our morning and evening meals uptown and then we would pack a lunch for the rest of the tour. It wasn't desirable but we had a lot of fun and got a lot of work done. And finally, it got the biologist and the hatchery man working together -- that project.

AW: Yeah, I enjoyed it. I was single at that time. I often wondered how you folks who were married kept up any relation with your families because you were stuck up there. I didn't have a family around so--.

RM: To give you a little idea on how it started, I got a phone call at the Anaconda Hatchery from Walt Allen and he said I want you to go up to the Marias project and help them guys get started up there. I said how long. Oh, he said, a couple weeks. This was in July and I got back in November and I was home once in that length of time.

AW: You only got one trip back?

RM: Yeah, one trip back. And I used to call my wife every Saturday night to make a collect phone call and I'd tell her, talk as long as you want, cause you're paying for it.

AW: That project, as you say, put everybody working together. It also I think made some of you fellows in the hatchery system that hadn't been on very many field trips a better idea of what was out there in the water when actually you saw the operation.

RM: We got our eyes open. The time we was getting our eyes open these young biologists got their eyes opened because they was working with a bunch of men who were older and knew how to work. And they learned some things. And we learned things. I worked with Art Whitney and we was poisoning backwater off one of the drainages one day and we turned up more baby carp fry than I could raise at the Anaconda hatchery.

AW: I remember you saying that day, “Good God, there's more fish here than I can raise all year.”

RM: Yeah. So anyhow it worked out good and I have been lucky. I have traveled this whole state of Montana and worked all over it and got in on several programs to begin with, like we started planting fish with airplanes instead of pack horses. And that went into the days of developing. Cliff Higgins, the pilot of the helicopter and myself developed the equipment that was used to survey mountain lakes. And that made for a good project for planting. And then they got to even planting fish with the helicopter.

AW: Before you and Cliff developed that, as I remember, you were first able to plant fish by air and all of a sudden that allowed the people who wanted to plant fish to plant much faster than anybody could ever keep track and much more planting.

RM: Much more than was needed.

AW: Much more than was needed in lots of cases. Yes and it wasn't until you and Cliff worked out the details of the helicopter that we could begin to keep up. And then, as I

remember, we had the fish planting policy that said no mountain lake would be planted unless it had been surveyed. Finally put it on a basis where we were planting to produce something and not just planting because the water was there.

You had another airplane experience. This thing doesn't have to be in chronological order; we can back up from the Marias. But sometime before the Marias I think you had an experience with not only flying fish, but flying horses.

RM: Well, Tommy Schurr and myself was detailed with the job of finding some Montana cutthroat trout to start a broodstock in the hatchery system. And they flew us into the south fork of the Flathead, the Bob Marshall wilderness area and put us off in there and we tried to find the source of spawn. But it was a big country and we was afoot and we couldn't do anything. It kind of washed out and fell apart at the time, but Walt Allen didn't believe it would die there and the next year he called me in and wanted me to go back in and try to find some good spawning cutthroat. I told him, I said we can't do anything there afoot; it's too big a country. We got to have some horses in there. So, he said, take in horses. I said the only way to get horses in there at the time we need them was to teach them to snowshoe or to fly. Well, we'll fly them in, he said.

AW: Is this because it was early in the year and the passes were full of snow and the horses wouldn't make it over?

RM: That's right. There was no way to get in. So he called up Johnson Flying Service in Missoula and wanted to know if they could do it and they said they could. We got a hold of a veterinary in Drummond to go up to the Boyd Ranch where they had a small airstrip. We had three horses we flew in. Two the first trip in and then one. We anesthetized the horses and hog tied them and moved them by hand into the airplane and flew them in asleep. Drug them out at the airport and let them come to out there.

AW: How many people does it take to lift a horse into an airplane?

RM: About eight. All lifting hard.

AW: I'll bet. And then when the horses came to after you unloaded them, did it take a long time, were they alright when they came to?

RM: It was very interesting. Two of the horses we had had been into that country. One of them belonged to a game warden and the other one belonged to Tommy Schurr. And they'd been into that country. We unloaded the horses at Big Prairie ranger station and the third horse had been bought by the department from over east of the

mountains and didn't know what a mountain was. So when the first two horses we took in begin to come out of it, the veterinary who was there supervising that end of the project, said just rest them for a couple days, just turn them loose and don't use them for a couple days. Well, with two old horses that had been in that country, they walked around the edge of the fence for two days and they'd stop and look and as much as just look and then one would go walking again. Just as much as to say we know where we are but how the hell did we get here. And the other horse paid no attention, just went off to grazing.

AW: The one who knew nothing wasn't upset by it at all. The two who knew where they were wondered how they got there.

RM: Yeah, they knew. But anyhow, we worked on that and that wasn't successful. And then the next project was to go in there and fish through the ice in the wintertime with a plane and fly the fish out. Well, we didn't have planes big enough to haul the fish out with water so I started experimenting there at the Anaconda hatchery with some adult fish we had there for display. Anesthetized them and see how long I could keep them packed in ice and then bring them back to life by putting them back in water. We worked out a deal with, we could do it, we could.

AW: How long?

RM: Oh, I kept them out for 12 hours.

AW: Packed in ice?

RM: Anesthetized with Seconal and they came out of it alright. So that's what we did. We went in there, a crew of us with a couple of airplanes and stayed at the Big Prairie station for a couple of weeks and fished through the ice on Salmon Lake. And boxed the fish up and we'd hold the fish we caught with hook and line. Made a holding pen for them and got a bigger hole in the ice and we had a cage we put down there to hold them. And then the pilot--.we'd pack them in ice and he'd fly them out to the Arlee hatchery. Vern Campbell at the hatchery was bringing them back to life and kept them there at his hatchery. And that's how we got our first cutthroat.

AW: That was the basis of the hatchery's cutthroat broodstock?

RM: Yeah.

AW: And about what year was that? I'm pretty sure it was before I went to work in '51 and I remember hearing about it as something that occurred before then.

RM: No, it was in the about middle '50s I think. But I was in on all kinds of projects like that, just like I said, because I didn't know how to say no. They were all interesting. I had done a little packing when I was a kid with horses and mules so anytime we had to go that way I ended up doing most of that.

AW: And you did packing on your own into the South Fork after that?

RM: Oh yes.

AW: Something to do on your vacation?

RM: Yes, it was Montana and I loved Montana. But the next project we got into, we decided we had to have a planting program so the hatcheries could put their stuff where it would do some good. Not just do it because you're getting pressure from this sportsman or that one to plant his favorite fishing hole or something like that. So, it was--. I think four or five of us who was put on a committee to come up with, develop a planting program, and I worked on that all the time. Ended up with the last few years I was in the department I was--. It was done by two men, myself and George Holton. We would go from hatchery to hatchery and meet with the hatchery people and the biologist who was responsible for the fishery in that area and set down and beat heads till we got the right answers on what kind of fish to plant. Saved a lot of confusion. And another thing: it kind of cured was the fight that was going on between the biologists and the hatchery people. Bud Gaffney, the biologist from Bozeman, was death again our program and I was death again his and fought all the time and one day we was at a meeting and somebody got up and said this was kind of a milestone we got right now. We got Mitchell and Gaffney arguing on the same side.

AW: I think I was the one who made the statement at a meeting in Bozeman.

RM: So, I've been very fortunate. I had a lot of undesirable time at the department. Gone away from home a lot. They run a survey, one time years ago, they were trying to change the hatchery people's wages a little bit, get them in a little better position. They sent out a questionnaire and wanted to know how many nights do you spend away from your station. So I went through the logbook at the hatchery for that year, and I'd slept away from home nine months out of the twelve. So, some of it wasn't good and I was lucky to have a good wife to keep things on an even keel.

AW: Yes, I think we've all spent quite a bit of time away from home, but it was, I agree with you, it was a real good life. I think we were in when it was more fun than it is

nowadays.

RM: Yeah.

AW: Part of its the fact that we're older and we were younger then, but I know you've told me that before, we're both fortunate we had a very good life we saw an awful lot of Montana and happy we've left it in better shape than we found it.

RM: That's right.

End of tape.

Transcribed by Margie Peterson
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