

Oral Interview with  
Joe Huston  
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Interviewer:  
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This interview was conducted at Joe's home near Kalispell, Montana.

AW: Joe, let's start out with your early history, how you got started in the fish business.

JH: Well, I was born in Sanders Valley in Monte Vista, Colorado in 1933. I became interested in fish through the influence of the man by the name of Mitchell - the first name unknown now - who worked for the Colorado Fish and Game at the Monte Vista rearing station. Plus, my Father and brother were interested in fishing all the time rather than playing golf.

AW: You were associated with someone who was in the fish business then? Someone who had a fish hatchery?

JH: Yeah, somebody in Colorado Fish and Game, where they reared such things like rainbow trout, brook trout, and what not. During high school, I went to Colorado College for four years, got a BS degree in Fisheries. Started in on a master's degree in 1956 and went to the Army for two years and came back and graduated with an MS in Fisheries Management in 1959. I applied for jobs in various states. It was really an "act of God" or the "fickle finger of fate" that I ended up in Montana rather than in New Mexico.

AW: Did you have offers from both places?

JH: Well, I hadn't had one in Montana. I'll have to tell you a story. I was sitting in Fort Collins, I was supposed to drive down to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and leave the next morning. The night before I was supposed to leave we had a hell of a blizzard. I couldn't leave, and the next night George Holton from Montana called.

AW: Just timed right, huh?

JH: Yep, true story.

AW: Then you started out in Montana?

JH: Then, how they picked me to go to Missoula, I have no idea for sure. But the story I heard from George Holton after several years was that Art Whitney was regional manager at that time in Missoula and was given the choice of whether he wanted a thinker or worker. So, he got stuck with me. And the thinker's name was Gene Welsh, I believe, and he ended up in Great Falls with Nels Thoreson.

AW: Well, I think that was probably a little bit of a story they fed you too. I don't remember my part of it. Yeah, you started for me and then you worked as a biologist in Missoula, for how long?

JH: Through May of '59 through July 1960 when I was offered the position of Reservoir Biologist at Thompson Falls. And I've been connected with the reservoirs ever since. I went through the hay-day of Noxon, Gorge, through all the bad years and now back into the good years. I've been associated with Hungry Horse Reservoir from 1960 to '82 and the Libby reservoir project from about '66 through '82. The bulk of the federal reservoirs were taken over by the contracts by BPA. Since then I've been involved in quite a bit of native species management, genetics work, largemouth, smallmouth, warmwater fisheries development in Noxon Rapids Reservoir, which I'm now getting ... about because of bull trout.

AW: One of the things you had to do in the order to accomplish some of these jobs was sampling rivers the size of the Kootenai and develop some night-fishing techniques. Do you want to give me the background on that, how you experimented with that?

JH: Well, actually the basic idea came from Bob Shumacker for this development of gear for large rivers and reservoirs, and <we> started in about 1966. We worked for Washington Water Power to develop a machine to do it, which they were not capable of doing. Then jet boats came on the scene, which really eased the problem of working in large rivers. And we threw together a jet boat, some sampling gear and did the first major work in Montana in about 1969.

AW: The technique of sampling from boat has been developed by Vincent in Bozeman but he was on smaller rivers and you had to change the timing to get .. I think you were the first one to go into nighttime shocking in order to corral the fish.

JH: Yeah, everybody who comes on has to be convinced. But the problem is you can go out in daylight on large rivers and work for two hours and catch two fish and in the nighttime you can go out and work two hours and catch two thousand fish, because fish will not run from a boat even if it's lit up with underwater lights at night. Whereas

they'll run from a boat in the daylight, probably from the shadow.

AW: And they may even be in different places in the river in the daylight.

JH: Yup, in the dark they'll come in the shallows and feed.

AW: Well, that took some doing too. You just don't take any biologist that happened to be walking by and have them run your shocking boat when you're sampling a river at night. You need to do a little bit of work before familiarizing yourself.

JH: Oh, yeah. You got familiar with a section and some people just can't drive at night at all. We had one man who was a responsible boat driver during the daytime but anytime he got out at night he got completely disoriented and lost, and he got us in a couple of big jams. Wrapped the boat up around a bridge on the Fisher River.

AW: Crosswise against the bridge or cross wise against a large boulder?

JH: Crosswise.. yeah, I know. Only thing that was damaged was one dog who happened to fall out over the boat and the guy grabbed his tail and hauled him back in the boat, and in the process kind of roughed up his genitals and they were swollen for two or three days.

AW: But none of the humans got hurt?

JH: None of the humans got hurt.

AW: And you had to do it at odd times during the year?

JH: Oh, yeah, we shocked in December and about any month of the year. Probably the worst thing was catching kokanee at Bigfork Bay for the hatcheries, where we were shocking in late November and December and temperatures down to -14° or -15° where we had to take and put the shaft of an engine into a fire pit to warm it up enough so we could get two or three batteries of ours up to get the thing to start.

AW: How'd you keep it from freezing up when you stopped then?

JH: Just leave it in the water.

AW: Keep the prop going in the water, huh?

JH: Keep the shaft in the water, no problem. We occasionally had to chop the ice away from the boat to get away, but as long as the prop was in the water, no problem.

AW: And it would still pump water and run?

JH: Yep. I suppose we were talking about accomplishments, let's talk about the old Hungry Horse Creek fish trap.

AW: Yes.

JH: Nobody has ever done much work on spring-spawning fish, particularly cutthroat because they spawn during high water. And most of our creeks will have a ratio of anywhere from 100 to 200 to 1, the difference between low flows and high flows. Making traps stay or having traps stay through high water was very difficult. Our first attempt was in Hungry Horse Creek in 1964. We got all the traps in just right before the 1964 flood hit, and after that we picked up parts of traps and whatnot for about two years thereafter. Then we went into what they called a modified wolf trap, and eventually after experimenting for two years we were able to make one work. And we were able to fish it anywhere from two or three CFS flow up to four or five hundred CFS. Then the Corps of Engineers liked the design so much that they built one on Young Creek that was capable of being operated up to nine hundred CFS.

AW: The one on Young Creek was considerably more expensive and complicated than the other one.

JH: More expensive, yeah, made out of reinforced concrete. And I guess when you get \$60,000 in your budget you can do a lot of things, whereas the Fish and Game, where we had maybe \$2,000.

AW: Yes. In fact some of it was pilched from other sources.

JH: Yeah. About the only problem we ever had with equipment, this is statewide Fisheries Division, was the type of vehicles they probably used to have ...down to us. Then most of them were International Harvester pickups or trucks, commonly called "corn binders." And that's about all they were good for, was binding corn. One person took three attempts to come from Helena to Anaconda with one pickup. Very often you'd have a flat tire you'd but the jack into the bumper and the bumper would come off without lifting the vehicle. One of them we had to pour Bon Ami into the oil to have the bearing seal up of the rings. Great joy.

AW: Yes, I can remember one order was to put in a radio and it was too small. I don't know if you got any of those, but on a real hot day anything other than a flat, level road, they'd boil over. Our people had already realized that you had to specify radiators size. They thought that was something that would come adequate, it wasn't International.

JH: Then I guess it was Jack Vashro that finally got International Harvester to admit that they put together their second class parts and made them into vehicles for bid vehicles.

AW: Yes, the factory seconds we got.

JH: And that's essentially when we started getting out of corn binders.

AW: Had you left Missoula when we had that 1960 corn binder Suburban? Always froze up when the weather got wet and cool?

JH: Yeah, well I drove it a couple of times. Yeah.

AW: It formed a ring of ice around the carburetor and choked itself to death every time. Real cold weather was fine, and just plain wet weather was fine, but if you had wet weather right around freezing and the thing would start to slow down, you could hear it choking itself. And finally it would just leave you along the side of the road. Take the air cleaner off and look down, there'd be a little ring of ice choking off the carburetor. Soon as that melted off you could crank it up and go again.

JH: Yeah, I had the joy of driving over McDonald Pass with Bob Mitchell one time; it took us about three hours to get over the top.

AW: In that vehicle?

JH: In that vehicle, coasting down the other side.

AW: Yes.

JH: During my 36 year career here - I do intend to retire in about late 1997 or early 1998, or earlier if they fire me. Two major accomplishments ..went through three. I've had about 20 summer helpers work for me in the many years, and of these 20, 16 are now working in the field of fisheries all the way from Missouri to Idaho and the state of Washington. Several of them are still employed in the state of Montana, one is Pat Markuson, Wade Fredenberg, who's with the Fish and Wildlife Service, Tom Weaver, and some new ones who are coming up on the scene is Tim Schwab, Washington Water Power, Kevin Sage, ... Lab in Missoula. Another one is David Krumquist, who is assistant chief of law enforcement for Colorado Fish and Game. And several others who are in private business.

AW: Well, that must give you a pretty good feeling to realize you didn't turn them off for the field anyway, they decided to stay with it.

JH: Another major accomplishment was, actually job ..., Washington Water Power into a new reservoir operation plan that went into effect in 1986. Of course the major man who helped me was Art Whitney, who at that time was chief of fisheries and for the price of several trips to Missoula and the price of a few cups of coffee and donuts and maybe some beers after work, we were able to convince the company they should reduce their overall drawdown and make the reservoir much more stable. Which in turn has led to tremendous improvement in the Noxon Rapids fishery. And measured by fisherman days, prior to 1985 it may have shown up on the creel census about 300 man-days per year. Now it is up around somewhere around 10 and 15,000 man-days per year. And this is strictly for a warm water fishery, comprised of largemouth bass as a primary species and smallmouth bass as a secondary species, an occasional large brown trout as a bonus.

AW: I think your efforts also impressed the company enough to where they realized they should put some effort into fish and wildlife, too, directly.

JH: Another accomplishment I'm really proud of is keeping misces shrimp out of Hungry Horse Reservoir and Noxon Rapids and Libby reservoir. Again we had some assistance from the Helena office on that little bash.

AW: A cross reference with Bob Domino's interview and the effects of misces shrimp which he and Bob Shumacker put in the lower Flathead system.

JH: And another accomplishment is a major effort toward the restoration of the west slope cutthroat in waters containing non-native or hybridized fish. It's a project that started in 1985 and is still ongoing.

AW: That's one that's had you sampling all over western Montana, isn't it?

JH: Right. I partook in a little of the trips, but they collected most of the fish, worked over all the lakes from the South Fork Flathead River drainage plus thirty or forty others and they estimated 500 miles on their travels, and probably about 200 miles by horseback. And in recent years, we've got - been using the helicopter, which makes it a lot easier. I think I only have one more thing to say on this interview. And that's about some of the characters we've got in this outfit. And some of the instances. Number one, I'm going to start with the interviewer, Mr. Whitney. One thing that sticks in my mind is him and Bob Mitchell passing the truck on the wrong side of the road going up McDonald Pass.

AW: Were you in the truck at that time, too?

JH: No, I was in the truck that was following. And I bet you remember that.

AW: Yes, we had the golden fleece, the one-ton, and we got behind a large truck when McDonald Pass was a two-lane road. And we didn't want to wait to get to Helena, so we went around; you could tell by where the dust was when you came around where we'd gone by. I remember that.

JH: Another character is Bob Mitchell, who I've had up and down relationships with for a good number of years. The down part I won't go into because it involves politics, the Goldwater versus Johnson debacle. Another character was A.H. "Doc" Chaney who was the game warden in Thompson Falls for years. My most favorite memory of him was he never had a pickup, never had a snowmobile or anything, the only thing he ever drove around was a station wagon or a sedan car. And he made more pinches in Thompson Falls area than the rest of the game wardens combined in Region 1 for most of the years he was there.

AW: He didn't need four-wheel drive?

JH: No, all he needed was a telephone. That's the end of the Huston interview.

AW: You mentioned Mitchell, but you didn't get into that very far. I remember you and Mitchell were on a high lake survey on the Bitterroot, I believe. I remember one time having to discuss with some other people the fact that some bar you were enjoying yourself in had a sign that if you tore the brass rail out you would get something, and--

JH: Yeah, if we were able to tear the brass rail off the bar, we would get a free drink. And Bob and I tore it off and should have probably ended up in the pokey.

AW: Well, we also chased spruce bug worm down on the Bitterroot, you were in on some of those.

JH: Yeah, down in the Bitterroot, on the West Fork. There'd be the Forest Service biologist talking to the airplane pilot saying, "Stay away from that creek," and there be the bug man saying, "Hit the creek," and they got a lot of DDT in the creeks and killed all the bugs. So, I remember we didn't have any fish kills.

AW: No, we did have quite a bit of DDT in the creek, but it came from mix-ups in the weather and what the Forest Service was doing. Well, if you had to do this over again, would you choose the same kind of career?

JH: Same place. Yes. I probably would.

AW: Most of the <interviewees> have been quite definite. Sometimes they qualify it and say well, not if it was the way it is right now, but if it was the way when I started out, I'd be glad to start again.

JH: Well, everybody, I can say and I've lived through the best of Montana and that was in the '60s and '70s. And its gone downhill, but that's to be expected. More people move in, more pressure.

AW: Yeah, it was more fun in the old days.

JH: More fun in the old days. I think we probably accomplished as much or more than they do now. Before the age of the computer.

AW: Yes, I agree with that.

JH: There's lots of pressures now that we didn't have then. We've got the environmentalists really fighting us, a lot of cases, as well as the timber industry. Everybody wants something different and everybody wants to do their own thing and we're getting fish scattered all over the country that shouldn't be there.

AW: Yes, the bucket biologist have really gone out with the advent of the ... and the boat.

This is the end of the interview.

Transcribed by Margie Peterson.