

# Interview with Emmett Colley

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Interviewer:

Art Whitney

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Emmett Colley lives at 411 S. Lamborn, Helena, MT 59601, (406) 442-8156. Emmett is a retired hatchery manager and bureau chief who worked many years for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This interview was taken at Art Whitney's residence in Helena, Montana.

AW: Emmett, let's start out where your folks came from and where you were born and grew up.

EC: My Mother came to Montana from Colorado over the Mateetsee Trail to Fishtail, Montana. Granddad homesteaded a ranch there and in later years he got the "gold bug" and decided to move to Cooke City. Unfortunately, like most gold miners he didn't succeed in becoming rich. My Dad came from Virginia when he was a young man and came to the Emigrant area and worked in various places like sawmills and ranches. I was born in Chico Springs, Montana, in 1920. At that time there was a doctor and a hospital there. In the early '20s, my Father was employed by the Fish and Game Department at that time. We lived at the Emigrant Hatchery which was across the river from the present site, which is on the Story Ranch. They moved the hatchery in 1933 to the present site that it now exists. We don't own the hatchery anymore, it's been sold to a private individual.

AW: Were you at the hatchery when it was moved from one site to the other?

EC: No. Well, at that time, other than the foreman, the hatchery manager, assistant managers and other employees only worked half a year. So, we didn't reside at the hatchery.

AW: Only the manager resided at the hatchery?

EC: Yes.

AW: One of those two hatchery sites was on the wrong land, wasn't it. I remember in a report that one of the ponds was on the wrong place.

EC: That was probably on the old Story Ranch. There's quite a large area now around the hatchery. It was purchased from W. T. Anderson. I attended schools in Park County and I remember when I was a child the Emigrant Creek would go dry in the summertime. The landowners would take all the water out of the creek and I'd go out and rescue all the fish. I had a little pond that I put them in to save them. Anyway, I would take the old eggs, the eggs that they'd picked off the fish hatchery and I'd pick out the good eggs so I could hatch some. As Vern Campbell used to say, the good eggs, the eyed eggs were normally you'd get some pick some of them up and as you were picking the dead eggs out and Vern used to call them pallbearers.

AW: So, inadvertently, you got some good ones along with the bad ones.

EC: Yes, there weren't many, but there were a few. So I picked the good eggs out of the bad ones and I'd hatch them and then I'd put them in another little pond, near the pond where I kept the larger fish. It became quite an interest to me and I decided that I wanted to work for the Department of Fish and Game. So, in 1939, my Father was moved to the Great Falls hatchery and I worked at various jobs, dairies, one thing and another, ranches. In the winter of 1941, one of the employees decided to quit. I was asked to go to work at the hatchery in Great Falls and I couldn't have asked for anything greater than being employed at the department. I think, maybe, you've all heard the story that I worked three days for nothing. Because at that time, they paid employees about the 25th of the month, so the fellow that quit decided he was going to take another job on the 28th he decided to leave so the hatchery manager asked me if I wanted to work for three days for nothing I could have the job. And I jumped at the chance. I'll go back to the time when I retired, Art Whitney managed to get those three days pay for me. I think they figured out about 45 cents an hour.

AW: I think it was. We didn't pay any interest on it; if we'd paid the interest we probably would have broke the department.

EC: So I got paid for all the time I worked. I was inducted into the Army in 1942 and shipped to Texas. I spent my entire training in the states in Texas. As I entered the Army, I remember they called my name out report to headquarters and they told me they was going to make a dental technician out of me and there was nothing farther from my thoughts to become a dental technician. Anyhow, I trained all the time I was in the states with a dentist and as our organization moved overseas, we were stationed right on the English Channel. They set up a hospital there. And on D-Day we were one of the front-runners of the evacuation from the coast of France.

AW: ...Dunkirk...D Day.

EC: That was D-Day, yes. We remained there for about two years and later we moved to Southampton, England. In a few months the war was over and we were eventually returned home. I returned home and was assigned to the Anaconda Fish Hatchery and at that time the employees in the fall and spring would be detailed at various spawning stations throughout the state. I was assigned West Yellowstone both that winter and spring in the following year. Later that fall I was transferred to Emigrant Hatchery until the fall of 1948 when I became ill with rheumatic fever. I took a sick leave for six months and then in the spring of 1949 I was transferred to Blue water and because there wasn't housing there, in the fall of 1949 I was transferred to Lewistown. I worked at Lewistown till the following spring and had a conflict with the manager so they transferred me to Great Falls till I could be reassigned.

AW: That manager at Lewistown at the time was a fellow by the name of Leo Gilroy.

EC: Yes.

AW: I had some experiences with him and I think others did. You say you had some difficulties with him, I don't think they were any different than anybody else. Lot of people had difficulties with Leo.

EC: I remember one day it was about 20 below outside and he told me to go out and scrub the fish ponds with a steel brush. I was scrubbing away and the steam was coming off the pond and he kinda leaned over the edge of the pond and said to me, "You see that green spot back there?" and I said, "yes." He said, "Bear down on it." That was one time he pretty near got a brush wrapped around his neck. Anyhow, then in July 1950, I believe it was, there was an opening at Blue water Hatchery as a manager. I was assigned to the Bluewater Fish Hatchery and as manager for 26 years. In 1977 I was appointed the Hatchery Bureau Chief in Helena. It was something that I had always wondered about achieving. I think in that alone that was probably one of the highlights of my life. I had a wonderful supervisor and assistant supervisor, Art Whitney was the fish administrator and George Holton was the assistant administrator. I remember one day the secretary took a picture of Art and George and I in the office and when she, after she got the pictures developed, she put it up on the bulletin board and it said there's over 100 years of service with these three people in the department.

AW: I remember that picture too, Emmett. It was surprising to add it up and find it was over 100 years.

EC: Anyway, I stayed in Helena until 1986 when I retired after 42 years of service. This alone I think has been, if I had my life to live over again I wouldn't change it.

AW: I think that's the best thing anyone can say about their career. I feel the same way. You do a good job and you enjoy it. You had some funny experiences I've heard you talk about in the past. Forgetting all about chronology now, I remember you had some problems with a lady in the fish pond over in Anaconda, do you want to go through that?

EC: Yes. One day I was grinding feed in the feed room at the Anaconda Hatchery and the manager's daughter came in and said, "There's an old lady in the fish pond out there." I said, "That's alright cause she used to come over and cut down dandelions around the fish ponds along the water's edge in the springtime when it was warmer and the dandelions would be green and she'd come over and get them for greens. Green salads. Anyway, I kept on grinding food and I happened to look back and I saw the little girl standing and looking out the window so I looked out the window too and here was this lady floating around in the fish pond. It was a circular pond and the water circulated around and around and she had on a big heavy flannel dress and it created a big air bubble above her shoulders and that was all that kept her from drowning in the pond. I remember, I went out to pull her out of the fish pond. I thought she'd fallen in and she said, "No, no." and stuck her head in the water. so I just jumped in with shoes and all on and drug her out of the water and I had her sitting on the edge of the pond when the manager came out. He helped me get her feet out of the water and on the outside of the pond. And he said, I know where she lives hand on to her we'll take her home. So while he was gone after the pickup she managed to get her feet back into the water again. That's how determined she was to end her life. So he took her home and told her family we found her in the fish pond and to keep an eye on her. About two weeks later they found her in Warm Springs Creek. She'd jumped in Warm Springs Creek and drowned. She was successful the second time.

AW: One of the oddest things about the fish ponds.

EC: It would have been awful to walk out there.

AW: It seems to me .. some of your experiences on traps were unusual too. Eileen spent some time up in West Yellowstone and the snow caught you and you had a heck of a time getting out?

EC: We went to West Yellowstone the year we were married in 1946 and in the fall of 1946 we were assigned to the south fork of the Madison to watch the fish traps. In November when we managed to take all the eggs we wanted to, we started out with the traps with a toboggan with the eggs and all our personal belongings on the toboggan. Two of us were pulling the toboggan on snowshoes and my wife was didn't have snowshoes and the snow was about two feet deep and she's floundering

through the snow and breaking through and just .. it was about a mile and a half from the traps.. anyway we put her on the toboggan and then we couldn't pull the toboggan. She wasn't that heavy but it just added that additional weight kept us from pulling the toboggan. She said that was the closest she ever came to leaving me.

AW: Well, she just didn't have snowshoes?

EC: No, she didn't have snowshoes. Then in the spring we went back to the main Madison traps and watched the fish traps there. And we had to live with the game warden that time and the state bought our food for us when we were away from the station. He'd go uptown and come back with expensive cheese and steaks for Eileen to cook for him as well as us and I didn't approve of it but there wasn't anything I could do because I didn't have any authority to say he couldn't buy food for us.

AW: You were on state food, so he bought the food for himself also on the state bill. That was the way in the early days, wasn't it. You bought camp groceries, they called it. The state just bought everything. I can remember one that the game people told me about where they had one of those things going and buying more and more state groceries for quite a crew and when the bill came to Helena and the director saw an item for a female when there were no females in the hatcheries or game wardens, he put a stop to it.

End of Interview.

Transcribed by Margie Peterson.  
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