

File 1

0:00:00.0

(This is Diana Dwyer and I'm gonna be interviewing Buck Follis. It is May 18th, and I'm in Brule, Wisconsin.)

0:00:11.8 End file 1

File 2

0:00:00.0

Do you want my personal trapping experiences or just—

(Either one. I went through your biographical form. Did you grow up in this area? Is this where you're from?)

Yeah, we've been here since '93.

(1893?)

Yeah.

(Wow. Were they Norwegian settlers?)

No, my grandfather was Irish. He came down from Canada.

(That's where my family came from.)

On my mother's side, they're French Canadians from Quebec.

(You've got the same family I do.)

[chuckles]

(That's cool. Did you start trapping when you were little?)

0:00:42.3

Yeah, I think about 1949 I started trappin'.

(Did your father teach you, your uncle?)

No, my dad help me trap weasels. They were worth pretty good money when I was a kid. So I don't pretty well on them. And then my uncle got me trappin' muskrats and mink about a year later, and I've been full-bore ever since. [laughs]

([laughs] It sounds like there's been a lot of history in this area of trapping.)

Yeah, there's a lot of trappers here, or there was. It's dyin' out.

(Have you been a commercial trapper most of your life?)

Right.

(When did you start working for the government?)

'90. The fur market went to heck in the '80s, when we had the stock market crash. It had been real lucrative through the '70s, into to early '80s, and that's pretty much what I did for a living then. And then the late '80s, things went to heck, so that's when I—Larry Dickerson, who was the district supervisor, hired me to work for this outfit. I've never regretted it. Best job I ever had.

0:01:51.2

(That's good to hear. They're good people. They really are wonderful people. [pause] Did you ever do any work for the Wildlife Research Center in Denver?)

No.

(Mainly just for operations around here?)

What I'm doin' now, the research work is for the DNR, and Wildlife Services is payin' me to—

(What are they doing?)

Collaring wolves.

(Just for tracking?)

I grab him and I put a—take a blood—some measurements, put a radio collar on him. I trap one out of a pack. We're also doin' some shock collaring, and that's through [pause] Central Michigan University. There's two young fellows up here doin' this study, and when I catch the right wolf, I'll put a shock collar on him.

(Is that when they come into an area that's got a fence on it and they get zapped?)

0:03:07.6

Well, what they do is, they got this shock box they put on the farm, and they get within a mile or half-mile, whatever it is, and it'll send that signal out and it'll zap 'em.

(Oh, it's a RAG or MAG? RAG or MAG. That's the acronym, I think. John talked about it once at the Research Center. What do you like best about what you do?)

Well, I've always loved to trap. I trapped my whole life. And to get paid for it— [laughs]

([laughs] It's heaven!)

In the first years, we were into the bear trapping big-time. And then in the middle '90s, around '96, '97, we started doing some depredating wolf trapping.

(Do you use any kind of special lures? Do you have favorites that you use?)

Yeah, we use different commercial lures. You can make your own. I like to use liver. Beaver liver, I think, is the best, but that's just my opinion. I'm sure deer liver'd work just as good. We use some different commercial lures, mostly wolf glands.

0:04:26.6

(Do you have any special traps that you like or prefer?)

Well, we've got a pretty good trap, that Livestock Protection Company trap. We've been usin' that now the last few years. It works real well.

(Do you have to modify it all when you get it?)

No, them are OK, we can use them right out of the box, just clean 'em up, boil 'em, dye 'em, and they're ready to go.

(What do you dye them with?)

I use logwood crystal. You can also use bark or leaves. But as long as the government's buyin' it— [laughs]

(Go top of the line? [laughs] What do you like least about what you do, besides the bugs, I'm sure?)

[pause] Paperwork. Yeah.

(Fillin' out all those forms? When you go out, do you get a phone call from a farmer or a rancher-)

Right.

Or do you get it from the operations guys?)

They call our office, the 800 number in Rhinelander. And then they'll—I've actually retired now-[laughs]

([laughs])

from this work. I fill in then on this research I'm gonna be workin' two straight months full-time. And I'll fill in for—they'll call our office and they'll send a guy out, and then when he takes some time off, I take over his line. And in the wintertime, when everybody's laid off, I've been able to keep a truck, and if there's a wolf complaint, I'll go do the investigation and the paperwork.

0:06:05.0

(Are most of the complaints in the springtime?)

They're pretty much all through the summer, but in the calving season is the worst.

(You have cattle up here? What about sheep or turkeys?)

We've had wolves depredating on sheep, turkeys, calves, deer farms, deer.

(How about urban problems?)

No, we haven't really had any.

(We had a mountain lion in our back yard just recently, and I live in a suburb-

Yeah.

So they're getting a lot closer than I would care.)

According to the public, we've got lions all over here, too, but we never find a track of one.  
[chuckles]

(They must see something.)

I've done a lot of investigating of mountain lion attacks on horses, and every time it's wire cuts from the barbed wire.

(I bet they don't want to hear that.)

No, they see those scratches, and it looks like little claw marks.

0:07:03.7

(Once you get out there, do you go to the same ranches or farms? Do the same areas have the problems every year?)

We got some real chronic farms. Guys have had traps on two of 'em. One farmer, he's gotten two females and one big male on them.

(Is it hard to catch a wolf? Is it?)

Well— [laughs]

([laughs] Depends on the wolf, right?)

They're all catchable. No, they're not really that hard. If you know what you're doin'.

(Any of them been really challenging? There's a wolf that's out in Montana that they can't catch right now, they've been tryin'.)

I'm sure there are some that really—that's one thing about the research job, one wolf in a pack. You get the dumb one, the smart one's smarter you know, it's hard to believe. But on the farms, the guys can usually work somethin', keep at 'em, they'll get 'em.

(That's interesting. Have you had anybody confront you about the trapping, any political situations, anybody giving you problems?)

0:08:16.8

Never run into it.

(You're lucky. I know people have had problems in Colorado.)

See, it isn't as bad here. It's—everybody—so many of the people are still [pause] got some ties to the farm life. My wife, she was born on an old farm up in Oulu over here.

(So they more of an appreciation for where they're food comes from?)

We certainly have some that have moved into the area that are—but overall, it ain't too bad yet.

(Good. I was lookin' at your pictures. What's the funniest thing that ever happened to you while you were capturing an animal?)

Well, wolves I haven't had really anything funny happen, but the bear stuff is—you interested in that?

(Oh, yeah, uh-huh.)

We've had a lot of things happen there, [chuckles] because now we're dealin' with urban problems. You go there and—and these are country people, too, they called me up and said I had a cub in the trap. I went to their house and looked in—we use a barrel trap. Looked in there and this bear was probably 300 pounds or better. I said, "This is not a cub, it's an adult."

([laughs])

They just laughed at me. The woman was mad because I was takin' that bear away [laughs] from its mother. [laughs]

([laughs] Oh, God!)

0:09:55.9

And another time I had a trap set in this lady's house. She was goin' through a divorce, she didn't have much money. And a bear broke in the house through the window. He went in there and he even bit through the kids' medicine bottle, ate all the cereal out of the cupboard, pulled it all out of there. So I set a trap, got a call the next day, I had a bear in the trap. My boss was with me that day, and we went over there and I drove up into the yard and there's a dead bear layin' outside the busted window. That wasn't broke the day before, went in through a different window. Well, we happened was, this gal come home, and this bear was in the house, and I had one of her yearling cubs in the trap. They both grabbed a rifle and started shootin' at the bear.

(Oh, God!)

And finally they hit it good enough so it jumped through the window and it died after it hit the ground. [chuckles]

0:11:03.7

(Oh, God! Lucky they didn't shoot each other!)

I was walkin' around—they were pretty worried they were gonna get in trouble. And I was walkin' around in the house and I went in the bedroom and there was a mirror about three-quarters of the way up the wall, and there was a hole right through it! I said, "God, you guys are terrible shots!" [laughs]

([laughs])

That broke the ice, they started laughin'.

([laughs])

They wanted to know what was gonna happen. I said, "I'll have to call the warden, and I'm sure nothin' is gonna happen." I knew there wasn't a judge that wouldn't throw that out of court immediately. Everything was fine. [laughs]

(That's a little scary.)

I said, "You got 25 bucks, you can buy the bear." [laughs]

(What do you do with the animals you trap? Is there a requirement where you have to take them? Do you do any taxidermy yourself?)

No. Like in the research wolf trapping, we release 'em right where we catch 'em.

(What about the ones you have to euthanize or shoot?)

They go into the freezer in Brule and then they go to Madison.

(Because when getting taxidermy animals for the library, we've been getting different animals to show as examples of what we've been doing. I don't know if we can get a wolf. What else was I gonna ask? When you started trapping when you were a kid, have you changed your techniques or modified how you do things?)

0:12:34.0

Oh, sure. Things improved. [pause] When I first started trapping, it was all foothold traps, and then we come out with the Conibear trap, and for beaver and otter, that's mainly what we use today.

(What's the longest you've had to try and figure out how to trap one particular animal?)

[pause] Oh, I suppose we spent two or three weeks on a certain wolf.

(So they're pretty smart? They can figure out—they're neophobic?)

Well, what happens is, it seems as though when you get on a farm, if you do everything right, you catch 'em pretty quick. But if you happen to screw up...[chuckles]

([chuckles])

They burn out on your lures and stuff real quick and just won't even pay any attention to 'em any more. And then you've got to go to a scat scent, find some scat from a different pack, put that out there with a shot of wolf urine on it. Coyote urine works just as well. And they'll go into that.

0:13:51.3

(I know the wolves in Yellowstone have been killing coyotes whenever they get the chance. Do they compete with them like they do here?)

Right. The coyotes, they're a competitor for the food source out there. 'Cause seems like the wolf and the fox don't have that big of a problem.

(Sounds like out West.)

But the coyotes and the fox do, because the fox is competin' more for the mice and stuff.

(Come in and grab what's left over at a kill?)

Right. The one thing we've noticed is that you'll get a kill on a farm, and the coyotes don't seem to disappear quite as quick as they used to. I think what they'll do is, they'll go in and feed on that carcass when the wolves are gone. Bill Paul found that out in Minnesota, too, he thought it was the same thing.

(That's interesting. I was gonna ask you about Russians. [chuckles] How did you get caught up with showing them around?)

I had a friend that was a station manager of the Fish and Wildlife station in Ashland. He was head of the all the research in western Lake Superior. And there were these 10 or 11 Russian doctors comin' over there from up in the Lake Baikal [Siberia] area, and they wanted to see some bear trapping. He roped me into it.

([chuckles])

So luckily I caught a bear that morning. I was supposed to show 'em. We took it out and the one guy wanted to see a black spruce swamp. I don't know, it must have had somethin' to do with what they have over there. We took 'em out and released this bear for 'em, answered all their questions, or tried to.

(That must have been hard, working through an interpreter, you said.)

Oh, yeah.

(It was like this time delay?)

0:15:59.0

Oh, yeah, it's quite a bit, too. But there, I got a couple of pins from 'em, lapel pins and stuff. I know some of the DNR guys that were workin' with 'em didn't get one-

(That's cool.)

So I must'a done all right! [laughs] But I was really nervous. It was the first year I worked for this outfit. Today I'd do it different. There'd be one of them supervisors would be there with me. (laughs)

([laughs])

But I had not idea how anything worked, you know.

(You're better not asking.)

That day I just come to work and had a day of orientation and, "Go trap some bears." And nobody had done that before. I had done it a little bit for the DNR, I worked for them for a few years as a seasonal equipment operator for fire control, and then I'd done some trapping for 'em. And it was about a seven-month job, so I had five months to trap every winter.

(Do you still trap on your own?)

Yeah, not much. The fur market is just startin' to come back. It'd gotten really poor, and this is the first year that I didn't really trap anything. Up till this year I always trapped some beaver. In fact, I used to trap a lot of beaver, 'cause that's where the money was. And now the market's gettin' better, so—

(Do you take, do any of your kids like to trap?)

Yeah, two of my boys. They're good trappers. But again, they can't make a livin' at it today, so they got jobs.

0:17:39.7

(What about any of your grandkids? I know you've got quite a few grandkids.)

Yeah, I've got a lot of grandkids, and none of 'em—I've got three boys in North Dakota, grandkids, boys, and they're—one's into it now, he started trappin' this past winter.

(Do you go out with them for long periods of time? The job you have here, you just go out on day trips. But do you sometimes go out for longer periods?)

No, no, I'm pretty much workin' these three colonies around here.

(Did you ever do that when you were younger?)

No, I've always trapped from home.

(Your location's so great, you don't have to go very far.)

No.

(Did you ever use dogs?)

Nope.

(I think that's more of a Western thing.)

Coyotes, yup. I've seen some of them do it.

(Mountain lions?)

Oh, yeah, for lions, yeah.

0:18:38.1

(There was a thing on the news a couple of days ago saying they say a mountain lion, but it probably was a shadow or something. Nobody's seen the tracks yet.)

We can't ever find a track. Two years ago, the wildlife manager and I are real good friends, at DNR. He called me up on day and said, "Want to take a road trip?" [laughs] "Yeah, what're we gonna do?" He said, "Run down to Barnes and look at some lion tracks." I said, "We don't have any lions." He says, "Well, there's two guys in the Barnes ranger station [chuckles] who said there was a lion crossed the road down there." We went down there, and the first thing I'd stepped out of the truck, I said, "Look here, Greg." There was a big pile of wolf scat. And here's all these wolf tracks goin' across the road. They come down the snowmobile trail and crossed the blacktop. They still insisted way in there they found a lion track. We walked in there, it was just a wolf had stepped different, is all.

(The one they've got in Montana, the DNR guys are saying it's not a wolf, but the track is too big to be a dog and too small to be a regular wolf. But it's killed, like, 30 sheep so far in the last month or so.)

It might be a hybrid. We got some wolves down around Polk County, St. Croix County, down around there, I'm not sure. Those wolves got—they've got several wolves there and their tracks are much smaller than the wolves we've got up here.

(I wonder.)

I don't know if it's just a genetic thing or what it is.

(You have timber wolves up here, or gray wolves?)

Gray wolves.

(Is that the same?)

Yeah, same wolf, same animal.

(Somebody told me they called the coyotes “brush wolves.”)

Yeah, all the old-timers call ‘em brush wolves.

(I’d never heard that before.)

0:20:33.1

Yeah, and then you get farther east and they’re real adamant about brush wolves. The thing is, our coyotes are bigger than your coyotes, and the farther east you go, the bigger they get.

(You’d think they’d be smaller.)

You get out in New York, Maine and stuff, they’re up to—they’ll weigh 50-some pounds. I think what it is pause] when coyotes are migrating in and the gray wolves or timber wolves are bein’ killed off, there was some cross-breeding goin’ on.

(You can sure hear them howling. My parents live in Maine, and I go out and sit on their porch and I can hear them howling at night. They sound like, there’s a lot of ‘em. They make a lot of noise.)

Oh, man, the other night I got woke up here, they were right up here.

(They were callin’ away.)

They were yelpin’, you know.

(Right. They always sound like there’s more of them than there really are.)

They had to be right here in the field, because it takes a lot to wake me up.

([laughs])

[coughs] Want more?”

(Great, thanks.)

[sound of water pouring]

The best thing about catchin’ these two wolves today is, I got my hours in for this week. I ain’t goin’ out till Monday.

(That’s good, you got a long weekend.)

Otherwise I work every day.

0:22:11.1

(Do you just go out and do patrols or check your traps?)

I gotta check 'em every day.

(Every day? How many people in this area have problems, do you know?)

Oh, man, I don't know.

(It seems like it's increasing.)

Oh, yeah, it's increasing quite a bit. I can think offhand, there's one, two, three, four, [pause] five, six, seven [pause] I bet there's 10 farms that we've been on in the last couple years.

(Gale Halverson I was talkin' to yesterday said that he had a turkey farmer that lost over 300 birds in one night.)

Yup.

(They come in and they don't eat all—they just eat the heart and the lungs and breast out and leave the rest of it.)

They do that pretty much with a lot of stuff. They'll kill a calf or a deer and that's the first thing they do, go and they slick out everything out of the rib cage and the stomach and just be gone.

(Do they take parts of it back—if they've got cubs, do they take it apart and then—?)

Right. I got a wolf here three or four years ago, a research wolf, with a 90-some pound nail, and I seen this pile of stuff there it had thrown up. After it got the wolf processed, I went over, and I'll bet there was almost a whole little fawn.

(In they? Feet and all?)

Yeah.

(I bet the bones are so soft they just eat all of it.)

Sure, and then they bring that back and regurgitate it at the den. Oh, yeah, you can—wolf scat is from now on. A person looks through that, you'll find hooves in it. They don't digest it all.

0:23:57.0

(Where I'm from, they're so rare, although they're startin' to move down from Idaho into Colorado a bit. After I talked to Gale yesterday, I was lookin' for wolves behind every bush as I was driving over here.)

There's a lot more wolves in Minnesota than we got.

(Yeah, they're movin' around.)

The first wolf tracks I seen was 1976. [pause] My boy coming in from turkey hunting.

(We're almost done. What do you think trapping's gonna be like in 50 years? Do you think it's gonna disappear?)

I don't know, I really don't know. All I know is, in the '50s and the '60s, I trapped and trapped hard. Couldn't make much money at it. I thought, man, I'd just like one shot, you know, the market's good. That did happen in the '70s, and there was a lot of people out then. Like I say, it lasted up till that Black Tuesday or whatever they call it.

(The crash, yeah.)

0:25:06.5

Yeah. 'Cause up to that time, there was some of these young gals they claim were makin' such good money, they weren't waitin' for some sugar daddy to buy 'em a fur coat, they were buyin' their own, and that stuff was really selling.

(I think with the anti-fur problems that we have, we see it in the big cities, I don't know about here, there's a lot of propaganda.)

Well, thank God for China. Japan takes quite a bit of stuff. China's a real big buyer right now.

(I didn't realize that.)

And Russia, a lot of fur goes to Russia. It goes to Greece and then they make up the coats and they ship 'em into Russia, 'cause they still use a lot of fur there.

(Do you ever go over the border into Canada to trap? Is that allowed?)

No, no. Sold a lot of fur in Canada.

(Is that lynx? I think lynx you can still trap up there?)

Right. In Minnesota now, there's lynx now in Minnesota again.

(They've just reintroduced them into Colorado. I think they turned 40 loose, and half of them died.)

Yeah. They gotta have them snowshoe hares to really make it. Yeah, they burnt down that big resort and everything else for them lynx out there. [laughs]

(I work at the Research Center, and we've been firebombed twice, so I get nervous. I go to work in the morning and wonder if—)

We had ALF hit us down in Rhinelander.

(Oh, that right, I remember him talking about that at the meeting.)

They come in and painted a bunch of trucks. [laughs] Trouble is, they were after the Forest Service, and our trucks were parked there. [laughs]

(That's what happened to our Olympia Fields station in Washington. They were after the Forest Service and they burned our building down, too. That was bad. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing people in your line of work? What's the biggest thing you have to deal with?)

[pause] Well, one of the things is that you go out there [pause] and everybody's gettin' on this kick, now, you know, that the wolves are killin' their calves. And of course they get paid pretty good money for that stuff in Wisconsin. They get full market value, so last year it was, like, 700, 800 bucks a calf. And of course they want everything to be wolf. You've got to go out there and investigate this thing. We skin the calf out and look for the punchers and try to measure those and convince 'em [pause] that if that animal was alive when that wolf bit 'em or whatever it was, there's gonna be hemorrhage in there. If he was a stillbirth or somethin', or he just died of pneumonia, there's not gonna be any hemorrhage.

0:28:09.3

(Almost like CSI, goin' in and doin' a forensic swab and all that.)

Right. That's probably the biggest problem with the wolf business.

(Do you think they'll go to insurance plans, where the state'll just pay for the damage?)

I don't know how they're gonna do that, I really don't know. I would imagine insurance would be so darn high on somethin' like that in wolf country that—

(Just one more question. What's the scariest thing that happened to you? I know somebody who had tranquilized a grizzly bear and gave it the antidote and it was supposed to take 20 minutes to wear off and that bear just came right up.)

Yep.

(He said he lost about 20 years of his life. [laughs])

I haven't had a lot of real scary stuff happen, although last year I had a bobcat when my boss was with me. Bobcats, when you put the kit stick on 'em, it's a noose, you know, and they got a real tender throat. [chuckles] You've got to be careful or you'll kill 'em. So I left it on there pretty loose. I bent over and I was gonna take the trap off or whatever, and all of a sudden it was just like that, [snaps fingers] bang! Right there. I didn't know if it was his teeth or his claws or what it was. My cap went halfway across the road. [laughs]

([laughs])

I turned to my boss and said, "What did that son of a gun—did he bite me or was that his paw?" He said, [laughs] "It was so quick it's hard to say, [laughs] but I'm sure it was his paw."

([laughs])

I could feel the blood runnin'. So I tightened her down good and got him out of there and let him go [laughs].

(Oh, God!)

All it was was a small scratch.

(You're lucky he didn't get your eyes.)

That was kind of scary, you know? If he said it was the teeth, I was really gonna clamp that thing down. He was gonna get sent in and find out.

([laughs] Make sure he's not rabid.)

0:30:13.9

With bears, I've never really had any problems. One night, it was in the fall. The corn was dry. We do a lot of fur trappin' in the corn. I went out there and I had two cubs in the trap. It was after August, it must have been October already then. And then we could move the cubs. I'd been to Rhinelander and I was on my way home and I stopped to pick these up. It was a cool day, they were fine in the trap. I didn't have a flashlight with me. I'm loadin' this thing, we got a trailer with a winch on it. I'm out there in the dark—

([chuckles])

And the wind's blowin' real hard. I could hear the corn rustling, [chuckles] you know. I didn't know if that was that sow gonna come up and try to kiss me or what. [chuckles]

([chuckles])

I never did see her, but I was gettin' nervous for a little while.

(Scary. Do you have any favorite stories you like to tell?)

[pause]

(You said you had a bear in your feeder last night, your bird feeder.)

Yes, son of a gun, they get in my tacos. I got a bunch of barrels of tacos out there. I opened all of 'em up, they're in packages, and crushed 'em down for my pig feed, I've got a couple of hogs. [chuckles] He was into one of them last night, too. [pause] I don't know, I don't—

(What about these young guys that are comin' up? Are you training anybody?)

Yeah, I do some—I trained a fellow—a couple different guys for wolf trapping. One year we had 10 days between the dog training season and the bear hunting season with dogs, and that must have been in September. I had a guy out, he was a pretty good trapper. And then last year I had a fellow from downstate, took him out, and he went back down there and they had a wolf complaint, and he went out there and got a wolf.

(You did a good job.)

That worked out real well. I got a guy comin' next Tuesday for four days.

(That's good. I think it's starting to die out. There's not that many people there continuing it.)

It's hard to find experienced trappers. But we've got some good ones. We've had some young fellows that have turned out to be real good trappers. In fact, they got the best crew they ever had. They've got about 20-somethin' trappers, between the beaver and the bear trappers and the wolf trappers.

0:33:11.8

(When you go out to do beaver trapping, is it urban, it's mainly on the roads?)

Yeah. I don't get into that. They do a lot of trout stream work for the DNR. They got a contract with them. They got several colonies in the state. They do their road work. DNR and trout streams. And then there's some townships, also, in the program.

(Are there any trappers that you worked with that you really admire?)

Oh, yeah. There's a fellow from Philips, Ed Zydzik, he's a good trapper. He was good to work with. And then the guy that took my place, Eric Fromm, he's turned out to be a real good trapper, too. He was [pause] with me a few times. He was married, but he didn't have any kids yet, and any time I had traps out, he'd go, like, on the weekends, he'd just ride with me on his own time. It paid off for him. He's done a real good job for us.

(That's good. Is there anything you regret, doing less of or more of, wish you'd done more of?)

No, I really don't have no regrets about this job at all. For a guy that loves to trap—

([chuckles])

--it's the perfect job. Longer seasons would help, but that's the way it is.

(It gets cold up here--)

Yeah.

(--and stays cold for a long time.)

I mean if you had work, most of us only work about seven or eight months. When we first started, we didn't have any money. We had junk trucks. [chuckles] We had one bunch of trucks—

([laughs])

--they were Desert Storm trucks, great big Dodges.

(Had sand in 'em? [laughs])

0:35:11.8

And they had 'em painted blue. We called 'em the Smurf trucks. Now we got good equipment. Things are really comin' along. We got real good equipment, we got real good supervisors.

[phone rings]

Oh, man.

(That's ok.)

Probably my boss. I'm sorry.

(No, you're fine.)

Hello. Yep.

0:35:37.5 End file 2. End.