

File 1

00:00

(This is CD #1 of an interview with John Plaggemeyer. This is August 24th, 2005. John, I'm gonna have you start by spelling your last name.)

P-l-a-g-g-e-m-e-y-e-r.

(Very good. And this is Nancy Freeman interviewing. Give me a little background about your education.)

I went to school in—grade school in Plano [?], which is a little country school southeast of Jamestown. I went eight years there and then I went to a town school at Marion. That was my freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year. Two weeks after I graduated from high school, I went in the military, joined a army, enlisted for three years.

(Where is Plano?)

Uh, it would be about 27 miles southeast of Jamestown. It's no longer there.

(You were telling me it was destroyed?)

Yeah, a tornado went through there two years ago and took every building that was standing yet.

(Now, when did you go into the service?)

In 1962, June of 1962.

(And how long were you there?)

Three years in the army.

(Where were you stationed?)

I was in Fort Leonardwood, Missouri for basic training and then I went to advanced training in Austin, Texas in Fort Bliss. Then I was shipped over to Germany and I spent two and a half years there.

(Did you like Germany?)

Loved it. But I was ready to go home. [laughs] Two and a half years out of country is a long time.

(When you were growing up, did you hunt and trap?)

I did very little trappin', but I did an awful lot of hunting. We used to snare rabbits and 'coons and things like that. But as far as steel traps, I did very little of that. We used to have big rabbit and fox hunts where a number of us would surround a whole quarter of land and work to the

middle of it. Then in the spring of the year, or wintertime, we'd sell all the furs and have a big oyster stew and card party and stuff like that.

(That was when you were growing up?)

That's when I was growin' up. And so, yeah, I was born—I mean, raised on a farm, ranch-type situation. So I was a country boy and loved huntin'.

02:59

(Was there someone in your family who hunted also?)

My dad was a big hunter also. I didn't have any brothers—well, I got one brother that's nine years younger than I am, so we didn't really—'bout the time I left he was getting to a point where he could hunt, too. So— [pause]

(So you were in the service for three years, and when you came back, what did you do?)

Well, when I come back, I wanted to get a job with the highway department, mowin' road ditches or somethin' temporarily until September and then I wanted to go back to school and I wanted to be a veterinarian. But when I was in the Capitol building, I seen Fish and Wildlife Service on the board, and I thought, well, I may just try and see if they have a summer job or somethin'. Rew Hanson was the director of the state at that time, and went up and visited with him and then, just lucky, they needed a individual at that time that was single, 'cause they had a split area open. Two weeks later I was home from the army 14 days, and I started work with Wildlife Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife at that time.

(What year was that?)

That was in 1965.

04:27

(And what was your area?)

Uh, for three months I worked with some of the older trappers, and then they assigned me to the Langdon area, Pembina, and Cavalier in Ramsey County. Then they had another county down by Jamestown which was Stutsman County, and that's what made the split area. They were about 125 miles apart, a break in between.

(And they specified that you be single?)

Yup. Because of the split area. Because they wanted me to work in Langdon, like, two weeks, Langdon area, and then go down to Stutsman County and work for a week and a half, two weeks, whatever is needed. And they figured if they hired somebody that was married, they would have a hard time stayin' away from home that long, so. At that time you could specify stuff like that. [laughs]

([laughs] Yeah. Can't do that now, but you certainly could then. And then, what work did you do there?)

05:36

It was mostly nuisance animals, except I probably got around 10, 11 coyote complaints per year in Cavalier County. There was a number of sheep men and turkey ranchers that had coyote problems, and all the work I did on coyotes was either done with snaring or trapping, and most of it was snaring at that time, 'cause there was a lot of good brushy areas and stuff in that area, and I was more familiar with snarin' than I was with trapping at that time. And then eventually the trapping came—it got better and better and better, lot of hit and misses, and pretty quick I started relying a lot on traps, also.

(That doesn't sound like a lot of coyote complaints. Was it?)

It wasn't, it wasn't. It was a lot of skunk, raccoon, fox, a lot of nuisance animals. I got bat complaints. At that time we worked with animal—rodent and animal damage control or somethin' like that. So we did a lot of rodent work. I poisoned a lot of dump grounds. Like I said, there was turkey ranches and chicken ranches in that area, and they had a lot of rats and stuff around. They used corncobs to insulate their buildings, and that was a haven for rats and mice and stuff like that. So I peddled a lot of red squill. And then I did a lot of skunk work in these little towns. We had, you know, strychnine eggs at that time, and I'd put them out all over just about every town in Cavalier County and Pembina County and Rolette County. So I was busy constantly, but most of it was nuisance, bat complaints, bird complaints. Got to be a jack of all trades. [chuckles]

07:51

(How long were you there?)

I was in Langdon three years and then I moved to Cavalier for one year, because Cavalier County—at that time we went by counties, because the counties participated in the funding of the program, and there was—I don't know if you'd call them animal rights people, but they convinced the county commissioners not to have our program that one year, so then I had to move to Cavalier, to Pembina County, and Cavalier County went out of their program. And while I was in Cavalier County, I ended up still doin' a lot of work in Cavalier County, because the people still were requesting my assistance. So I think if I'd a stayed there, Cavalier County woulda come back into it. But at that time I only had two counties. So the area opened down here in the southwest part, so I took a transfer down here.

(So which county took away the program?)

Cavalier County.

(So Ramsey still had it?)

Ramsey and Pembina County still had it and Stutsman County also still had it. But at that time, the state was doing some reorganization-type things, so they took Stutsman County and gave it to somebody else. It was kind of like the area where I was at, there just wasn't enough work for one person any more. Which all changed within two years after I left. The state opened up, where it was state-funded instead of county-funded, so.

09:44

(So you ended up in this area of New England?)

Yup. I moved down here in May of '67—'68, '68. So—been here ever since.

(And this area is considered southwestern?)

Southwest, yeah.

(North Dakota. How was it different? Because you went from southeastern over—?)

I got rid of all the nuisance animals and worked strictly on coyotes. [laughs]

(Really!)

Yeah. Which I loved. After a while, I started getting into, you know, some—I had time to work on some nuisance-type animals and stuff like that, but when I first moved here, there was hardly any beaver work at all, but then the beaver population started growing in this area, too, and got to be a big job also. But when I first moved here, the first five to ten years was 90% coyote work.

(Wow!)

10:57

I had a lot of sheep men down here. A lot of big sheep men. I had probably a half a dozen sheep men that had over 3,000 head and probably—I would say Bowman County probably had more sheep than any other place in—I mean, the rest of North Dakota put together at that time. So I had plenty of work down there.

(You mentioned that when you first started in southeastern, you did more snares. By the time you got over here, were you doing more with trapping with the coyotes?)

I was doing all trapping. All trapping and aerial hunting. Snares or somethin' that I put back in the bag and put 'em away, 'cause this was not snaring country. And I found out later I could use snares in a lot of the areas, but I had to snare different than what I was used to. I had to snare cow trails and sagebrush instead of tree brush and things like this. And there's a lot more activity goin' on down in this area also, to where—hunting dogs, things like this, which I didn't contend with up there. So I had to be very careful with snares when it came to that kind of stuff.

12:23

(When you started in—here, in 1968, did you use any kind of other tools besides—?)

At that time, even up in the northeastern, I used 1080. And 1080 was one of our main tools. I had seven baits in the northeastern part of the state when I worked up there, so. And then when I came down here, it was way different again, because I had—I think the first year I was here, I had close to 30-some baits out. And that lasted until 1973, and then we lost that. That made a big difference.

(You could tell?)

Yeah, I could tell. Within two years, the coyote population really started coming back. But it really made a difference while I was usin' it down here. When I first moved in here, the coyote population was pretty high. And the 1080—I worked the area real heavy with the airplane at that time. Back before the '70s, we'd jump in an airplane and we'd start shootin' things from the time we left till the time we came back, which, you know, we lost that pretty quick, too, in the '70s. So we took a lot of coyotes. I would say, the first ten years I was here, we made a difference in the population here.

14:00

(Now, did you have just one county here?)

No, I had four counties when I first came here. And then one of the trappers in Medora retired, and then I ended up with seven counties down here.

(That's a lot!)

That's a lot of area. And it was all big coyote area, lot of sheep, it got to a point where I had a lot of calf losses in the spring of the year and stuff. So yeah, I had a—my wife didn't see me much in the spring of the year.

(Did you do much camping-in?)

We had a camper. Our office got some campers from Minot. They had a big flood up there, and they handed out a bunch of campers to different federal agencies, and I got a camper from them. I put that down south of Rhame in the southwest corner of the state, and I did a lot of living in that camper.

(So you would go in, stay for a few days, come out?)

I'd stay sometimes a whole week down there. [chuckles] And I'd stay there probably, oh, sometimes three, four nights and then I'd get a room in Bowman so I could take a shower and stuff. [laughs] And then I'd go back out there again. But yeah, I spent a lot of time in that camper for a number of years, so. But I had a big—it was in an area, a sheep rancher there that I got along with real well, and we put it on his place. So I had water and everything there, and that area was in between about four real large sheep men, so it worked out fine. It had a nice paved road next to it, so the airplane would stop and pick me up right alongside my camper, so.

15:52

(Did you use dogs?)

Never used dogs. Uh, I had too many dogs bite me, [laughs] ever since I was a little kid. I like dogs, but I don't want to work with dogs. I never have, and like I said, I get along with dogs now, [laughs] but they seemed to like to bite me a lot when I was younger, so I never got into dogs. Some of the guys did. A lot of 'em that were usin' 'em were havin' good luck, and some guys that were usin' 'em didn't. So I think it all amounted to whether you had a good relationship with your dog and you knew how to use 'em and train 'em and things like that. Some of the guys I don't think—they had dogs because other guys had dogs that were workin',

and, you know, that don't work, either. You have to like dogs and know how to handle 'em. So never had dogs. [chuckles]

(Did you do coyote calling?)

I did a lot of coyote calling. I did probably more locating with a call than I did actual calling to shoot. When I worked down in the southwestern part of the counties, where I had the camper, in that area, before the airplane came every morning I'd go out at least an hour ahead of time and locate the coyotes where I wanted to hunt. If I had four places to hunt, I'd have to get up a little earlier to go around and locate 'em. Most of the time the locating only paid off in the areas where you got 'em to answer you within the last half hour before you went in the air, because sometimes if you had 'em answer you an hour before, they had moved by the time you got there. Unless you were locating dens. Then you could find dens that way.

17:56

(How did you learn to call?)

Hit and miss.

(You just did it?)

I talked to a lot of old-timers that called and went with some old-timers and listened, and at first I wasn't gettin' much response, and the more you do it, the more it happens. After a while you get fairly good at it, so. I usually had about three different calls that I preferred, and I probably had 10 calls, but only about three of 'em that I used a lot, and maybe one I used an awful lot. I had one that I basically used for locating and one for calling in to shoot.

(And I assume that you did this with your voice? Because now some people do it with recorded sound.)

Oh, electronic—? Yeah, I've used an electronic call in the pickup on a trail or something, and I just put the loudspeaker on top of the pickup and play it and a lot of times you'll get some coyote to answer you off in the distance or somethin', but no, most of the time it was hand calls.

19:14

(You mentioned aerial gunning and the difference when you first started in the southwest part here, you would go out almost every day? How did that work?)

Well, when I first moved down here, we kind of had an unlimited amount of funding for aerial hunting, which was great when you move into an area. There was a lot of times I had 27 calls, actual coyote killing complaints, per week. And I found out real quick that by trapping alone, it just wasn't gonna happen. So yeah, I flew, uh, probably, maybe four times a week.

(Wow!)

That's with weekends and stuff, too. We, I worked Saturdays, Sundays, seven days a week. Yeah, we did a lot of flying. Sometimes we'd fly four hours in the morning and then go back up and fly another two, two and a half hours in the evening.

(Now, in the early days, did you have a radio?)

No.

(Did you have a ground crew?)

No. No, we had nothin'. I got very bad hearing [chuckles] from no ear protections or nothin'. We didn't really get any ear protections, I don't think, until the mid-'80s. Then we started wearin' helmets and—once in a while I'd put earplugs in, but I came back many a mornings where my head was ringin' so bad [chuckles] that I couldn't hear for three or four hours. But yeah, we didn't have a ground crew, we had no radios, no nothin'. You were just kind of on your own. Which was—we were very fortunate that we never had any accidents. I could probably write a book on all my close calls in the 34 years that I flew. [chuckles] But I was very fortunate that everything worked out OK.

21:22

(Tell me about a close call or two.)

Uh, one close call, we jumped five coyotes in real rough country and we shot four of 'em and we went down for the fifth one, which ran across a little ten-acre alfalfa patch, in between these rough hills, and we come in and run out of gas. We hit the ground, bounced twice before we got the engine goin' again, and we went back up in the air. But if it'd happened on one of the other coyotes, one of the first four, it woulda ended it.

(Because you would have hit a hill?)

Yeah. There was no place to land. Absolutely no place at all.

(And ran totally out of gas?)

Yeah. Well, in one tank. Most of the time you can switch tanks fairly easy, but both of us kind of panicked, being six feet off the ground. 'Cause I had just shot—I shot the coyote, and it started sputterin' and just quit. When the prop stops, then it's a little bit difficult. But he got it started again, and like I says, we bounced—he hit the ground pretty hard and then we bounced back up and we hit the ground again, and by that time, we kind of took off. [laughs]

22:49

And then we stalled the airplane twice in curves, in corners. It was in the evening both times, awful hot. We shouldn't have been out, probably 97 degrees at that time, and we shouldn't have been out doin' it. We had a full load of gas on. I'm not a small person, so these little Super Cubs, we normally pushed 'em to the limit on weight all the time, with shotgun shells and all that junk. And then we hit dead air behind a hill twice where we didn't have any left and had to bounce on the ground to go over. [chuckles] I guess if I thought long enough, there are just lots of times that things just didn't go right, but it ended up OK.

(Did you break in a lot of pilots?)

Yeah. Uh, I must a broke—I rode with probably eight or nine new pilots. Two I never asked back. After flying—after about 25 years of flying, you could about tell who was gonna make a pilot, huntin' pilot and who wasn't. I had two of 'em at that time, you know, between 25 and 30 years of experience, that I knew they weren't gonna make it. I had one individual about five years before I retired, a spray pilot—these were all spray pilots—he did a pretty good job, but he got to a point where I felt he wasn't confident, and so him and I sat down at breakfast that one morning and talked about it and he admitted he was feeling a little uncomfortable in the real rough country. So I advised him to quit, and he did. But he had a pretty good sprayin' business, he didn't really need this. He just thought this was gonna be kind of fun and stuff. Like I said, it's not for everybody, so.

25:01

The first three, four trips with a new pilot, I watched 'em real close. I was kind of leery the first time on all of 'em, and I didn't do my best shootin' with 'em. [laughs] But a number of pilots that I flew with, I had two pilots, terrific pilots, I shot probably 95% with 'em. When they went down, they were from three to five feet off the ground every time. The majority of the pilots were probably 15 to 25 feet. I was one of these guys, I got used to this one pilot real well from Montana, this three, four feet off the ground. I'm a snap shooter instead of an aimer, and it worked out just fine with me. I betcha I was shootin' 95% to 97% with him. And I'd get in down there in a plane with somebody that pulled the power way back and stayed up about 20 feet, and I had too much time and it took me four or five coyotes before I got back on again, so.

(So to illustrate the difference, when you first started with no radio, no ground crew, in a Super Cub, when you retired, your last flight or two, what was the difference?)

About the same as technology today and computers. It just—you got—when you had the radios and ground crew and stuff, you're just way more effective in findin' the animals. You know, if you run 'em up in the brush without radios and without ground crew, you left 'em and hoped that you'd come back and found 'em the next time. But you could be way more efficient and effective with radios and ground crew. Safety-wise, you know, you can't say enough good about the technology that we had in the latter years. Ear protections, you know, we always hollered back and forth, the pilot and the gunner, it just—sometimes your throat would be raw from hollerin' back and forth. Now we got radios with mikes and stuff on 'em and earphones in 'em, and it just made a lot of difference. It's like the old school and new school. And we used to do a lot of landing in pastures and prairie trails, and we got more safety-conscious after a while and didn't land in real high-risk areas any more. [chuckles] But a lot of these old spray pilots we had, the guy that basically taught me how to fly, he was a by-the-pants pilot and that's all he did. He flew in the military in World War II, and came out and he had a house, him and his wife got married and bought a house, and two weeks after they bought the house, he traded his house for an airplane, he said he just walked out of (?) a divorce, [chuckles] but that's all he ever did, flew Super Cubs. He sprayed with 'em and everything. So he was a good pilot. And like I said, he basically taught me how, and I went to ground school and stuff like that. I figured if I'm gonna spend that much time in an airplane, I want to know how—what makes it tick.

28:43

(So you went to ground school?)

Yeah, I learned how to fly. The latter years, the last pilots we had, I didn't do a lot of flying. Gary Larson, he was an awful good pilot, but he was a bigger pilot, and he had his seat back, so, and I didn't have room for my rudder, for my legs for the rudder pedals very well. So I did very little flying with him. And it was kind of, towards the end, been there, done that. [laughs] So it was kind of nice when we were goin' between areas to catch a little catnap or somethin', you know.

(What were some of the other tools that you used in the beginning? Did you use M-44?)

Yeah, we had the old coyote-getters when I started. I used—up in Langdon country, in the Van Coolie [?] area they called it up there, which was real brushy and kind of rough, I used 1080 and coyote-getters up there. They were real effective. And the lures we had in them days, I don't know why, but they seemed to be way more effective than they were in the latter years. I had coyotes dig down in that snow up there, foot, foot and a half, dig a coyote-getter out and pull 'em. And it seemed like when I moved down here and the M-44 came out, they could be right out in the open and I had a heck of a time gettin' 'em to pull it. [laughs] But lure was a big item.

30:26

Then they started changing the mechanisms on the coyote-getters. I still have a box here yet of probably 10 different kinds of experimental ones. I don't know if it was, if we never got the smell out of 'em or what, but some of 'em I had very little luck with. Then when we started usin' the M-44s that are bein' used now, it took a couple years, but they got to be real effective.

(What was the difference between the old coyote-getter and then the—you know, it morphed into M-44. What was the difference between the two?)

Uh, I thought there was a lot of difference at one time, and then after I got used to usin' the new M-44, there really wasn't any difference. You know, I think a lot of it had to do with change. You get a mindset on somethin' and somebody comes up with—some research person says, "We're gonna do it this way," and I think a lot of it had to do with buckin' the theory for a while, until you got used to it. And Bill Pfeifer, when he was state director here, he made a lot of changes. At first when he started changin', everybody thought, "This ain't gonna work." And really, Bill Pfeifer was about 20 years ahead of his time. A lot of the changes that he had wanted to implement, and a lot of people fought him on the original level and everything, but all them changes came to pass later on.

32:12

(What were some examples?)

Well, at one time North Dakota was strictly rodent and coyotes. And then it got to be, we had other types of situations that we should have been workin' on, in the eastern part of the state a lot of beaver, northern part of the state. And we did very little of that. Then we got into more 'coon and skunk and bird work. I worked on—I was probably the first guy in North Dakota that worked on Avitrol. The research guys came up from Denver, at that time it was Joe Guarino and Jerry Besser. I worked with them for about four years in the southeastern part of the state, in cornfields. We started in cornfields and changed into sunflowers later on.

(With Avitrol?)

With Avitrol. So it was kind of like Bill Pfeifer always said, "We gotta have more than one egg in the basket, otherwise if that breaks, we're out of business." So he put all kinds of eggs in there. It got to the point where we were workin' on rabies. We went around to all the schools in our areas and gave classes on rabies safety and stuff. We started doin' a lot of public speaking, elevator meetings( transcription note: grain elevators), you name it, whoever wanted—4H clubs. Some of us guys got into it more than others, but a number of 'em never did like public speakin'. I guess I got to a point where I kind of enjoyed it. So we did a lot of things. We had to be knowledgeable on bats and woodpeckers, you name it.

(So he really expanded the reach?)

Oh, yeah, he really expanded our knowledge and our services a lot. All the—I remember some of the trappers from Montana and South Dakota kind of makin' fun of us guys 'cause we weren't what you called "coyote hunters" any more, although we did a lot of coyote work. But we did a lot of other things, too. We got very knowledgeable in all species, and rodents.

(And now there's a lot of work on beaver.)

Yep.

(And birds.)

Yep.

(Was South Dakota combined?)

At one time we had what we called a regional office here in Bismarck, and then South Dakota was connected—I'm not sure exactly how that worked. I was so busy—it was after I transferred down here and I was so busy with my little world here that I'm not sure exactly what the politics was in the office any more. But there was about three years, I think, the original office was in Bismarck. It was kind of a subregional office. I think South Dakota in some way was connected with us. I did—at that time I was on a kind of a task force or—with the blackfooted ferret with people from South Dakota. I'm trying to think of the guy, Crookenberg [?] or something like that, that I was workin' with on the blackfooted ferret back in the '60s, late '60s. And I did a lot of work with him, too, did a lot of night-spotlightin' and stuff.

35:50

(And now they're combined states, North Dakota and South Dakota.)

Yeah. There's been some big changes from 1965, when I started. [chuckles] Attitudes, a lot of attitude changes.

(How so?)

Uh, the big attitude change that I seen was the killing. We were called "gopher chokers" many years ago because we choked everything we seen. [laughs] Not really, but primarily, that's what the people assumed that we were doin'.

(The public?)

Yeah. But we weren't real selective. And that was another thing that Bill Pfeifer instigated here in the state of North Dakota, that if you're gonna take an animal, be able to justify it. And then again, that was way ahead of his time, too, back in the late '60s and early '70s, to try to do that, because a lot of the old-timers I worked with, that wasn't their philosophy.

(It was, "Get everything"?)

If you seen 10 coyotes that morning, you'd try to kill 10 coyotes. But it got to a point where we had to justify what we were doin'. Some people were ashamed at—not ashamed, but they didn't want to talk to the public, because when the public asked 'em questions, they couldn't justify why they did what they did, so they just didn't want to talk to anybody about it. But then Bill, he got us to—we had booths at the state fair, all this kind of stuff, and got us uniforms, to where we looked professional when we went public speaking and went to county fairs or state fairs and had a booth. So he brought us a long ways.

38:00

So North Dakota was probably a pioneer in getting into numerous things, and I think that's one of the reasons research from Denver picked North Dakota a lot for a lot of their projects and stuff, too.

(How long was Bill state director?)

I would say Bill was state director for [pause] maybe seven years.

(In the late '60s?)

That would have been in the late '60s and '70s. He was assistant state director for about three, four years under Rew Hanson and then when Rue Hanson left, he became state director. So I would guess totally he was probably in the state supervisory position for seven, eight years, maybe even a couple more than that. Then before that he was a pilot for the state. He had an airplane accident, him and a trapper, and he got hurt pretty bad, and then he went back to school and got his degree in wildlife biology and he came back into administration.

(So he was a gunner?)

39:15

He was from the ground on up, yeah.

(Interesting. You retired when?)

Well, it'll be December 31, '99.

(So by the '80s and '90s you were doing beaver work?)

About the early '80s I started into the beavers and by the '90s there was lots of beaver work. The fall—and in fact, I really didn't have time to do all the beaver work that came in. The philosophy was that I was supposed to work the coyotes first and then when I got done, do the beaver work. And I would try to get more serious beaver problems out of the way, and then as I had time—beaver is different than coyotes. Beaver, you had to check traps, you know, pretty much every day, and then a lot of night shooting and stuff like that. So it was quite a bit more demanding on specific places. So it took a lot of time.

(What other species were you working on by the time you ended? You had coyote, beaver, bird?)

Uh, not too many blackbird by the time I retired, but I think it was right around the early '90s, we were doing a lot of hazing blackbirds out of sunflower fields. I do have a large farm area in my area here that raised sunflowers. So I had—that was part of my program, too. Which worked out OK, because we'd haze—I mean, shoot coyotes in the morning for two, three hours and then we'd go hazing, and then the same thing in the evening, we'd haze for a while and the last hour before sundown we'd shoot coyotes again, so we kind of worked the two together. We kind of used some of the hazing money for shootin' coyotes as well, [laughs] is what it amounted to. So it helped the program out quite a bit.

41:27

(What did you use to haze? How did that work?)

Super Cub. We had basically the same people contracted to fly us for hazing as coyote huntin', and it was just basically a lot of aerobatics over sunflower fields trying to get these, harass these blackbirds for two, three days in a row to—and a lot of times in this area it worked pretty good. After about three days of constant harassment, shooting at 'em, you know, shooting into the large flocks and stuff and chasin' 'em with the airplane, they would pull out. What you were doin' basically is hurrying up the migration of the bird. They'd just maybe go down another 10 miles into somebody else's sunflower fields, and then I'd get a call from them and we'd head down there. Next thing we know, we've got 'em pushed over into South Dakota. [laughs] So as far as really solvin' problems overall, probably not. Individual problems, I think it worked. But it was, like I said, constantly aerobatics over sunflower fields, which is not a good safety thing, again. North Dakota was very fortunate. For all the flying hours that we put in in the state during that hazing time, we never had an accident. We had incidences, but we never really had an accident.

(And were there many accidents with all the coyote work, either?)

No. No. North Dakota was very fortunate. We, you know, tore some landing gears off and a few things like that. I call them "incidences," but not really an accident.

(And no deaths, it doesn't sound like?)

No, no deaths at all. So for the amount of hours that we flew in the state of North Dakota, we were pretty safety-conscious. We had workshops periodically on aerial gunning and stuff. If new guys came on, we made sure they knew what they were doin'. But I flew for—maybe I shouldn't make mention of this, but I flew for about 27 years and I shot a hole in the strut, and the strut is what holds the wing on.

(That happened once?)

That only happened once. [laughs]

([laughs])

44:00

That was enough! We limped the airplane back to Baker, it happened south of Marmouth, a nice, calm morning. To this day I have no idea what happened, how I did it or whatever, but I shot a hole, the strut is about three inches wide, and I shot a hole right in the middle of it, and there was about—oh, not quite a quarter inch holdin' on each side of that hole, holdin' the strut together. By the time we got back to Baker, the wing had lowered probably, oh, maybe five, six inches. When we touched the ground, it went down probably about ten inches and it bent the little strut, you know, there's two struts holdin' the wing up. It bent that other one and we come in lookin' like a wounded duck! [laughs] But I know of about five other gunners that did the same thing—

(Oh!)

—in the time that I worked. The only thing is, nobody found out about theirs, and they did mine! [laughs] So it—

(Was that when you were first starting out?)

Oh, no, I had hunted for 27 years.

(Wow!)

And bein' they found out about it, I talked about it a lot when we had safety seminars and stuff, and told people, you know, "I don't care how safety-conscious you are or how well you think you know somethin', crap happens."

(Accidents, yeah.)

And you know, it gets to a point where you do things so many times, repeatedly so many times that they become repetitious, and you get careless. It's just like goin' to defensive driving courses every two years. A lot of people think it's crazy, but they're eye-openers. They bring to light things that can happen, by lookin' at movies and stuff. And to show somebody a hole in a strut is kind of impressive. It can happen. Like I said, there's five other guys that did the same thing, and it never did get out. [laughs] And all of 'em, well, Marv Ingman, he shot two of 'em. I would say both of 'em were within about three years of each other, and he had probably 30 years already. So it happens.

(Almost a lesson, as you said.)

Yeah. So you gotta be aware all the time. I shot a double-barreled shotgun all the time. Once I a while, I'd try an automatic, and to me, in an airplane, an automatic, every time you pull the trigger, you got another one in there, until the cylinder's dry, and I never liked that in an airplane. A double-barrel, I'd crack it, pop the shells out, I knew it was clean before I brought it in. I shot

real well with it, so I shot double-barrels all the time. When I quit, I think maybe Shorty shot a double-barrel yet, when he quit, but otherwise everyone else was into automatics.

(I was just gonna ask that, because Shorty did talk to me about how uncomfortable automatics made him for the safety issues.)

47:35

They made me very uncomfortable. And if I had an automatic jam up on me, I left the shotgun out the window while we landed. I wouldn't bring it in. A lot of the guys, they'd bring the shotgun in and try to unjam it and stuff, but I'd just—to me, that's an accident lookin' for a place to happen.

(Did the majority of people use automatics?)

Yeah. I would say about late '70s we started getting some Brownie automatics and stuff, and the newer guys comin' in at that time started shootin' automatics. And like I said, Shorty and I were the last ones to shoot double-barrels. I'd say the last 20 years, or 15 years, everybody had automatics.

(Was there—is there an advantage to it?)

No. Uh, I think Shorty was—kind of like I was, he was a snap shooter, too, and he shot a lot of times just one shot. I very seldom would shoot two shots on a pass with my double-barrel. I just shot one shot. Unless there was two coyotes runnin' side by side, then I shot twice. But you get to a point where when we started out we had double-barrels and we only had two shots, so we had to rely on that, you know. So we just, you know, got to a point where we were just one-shot shooters, and it got pretty effective. Where some of these new Banellis, I think you can load up seven shells in 'em, and a lot of these guy'll shoot seven shells in one pass. What you're doin' there is, you're just throwin' shells, bullets, out there, beebees, and I'm not sure that you're really serious about what you're doin'. [laughs] It's kind of like the old-timers, when bullets were expensive and they were shootin' rabbits, you know, they made 'em count, so.

49:39

(Did you do much work with fox?)

I did—we had a number of years where fox were—to me, I called 'em a pain in the butt. We had—oh, up until about late '80s, a lot of people had chickens and things like that around, and fox and 'coons and mink and weasels and whatever were in chicken coops. Then we finally got people to put fences around their chickens. It eliminated a lot of the fox problem, but we still had 'coons and mink and stuff like that. So yeah, I did a lot of fox work. To me, fox are maybe a keen animal, sly, but a dumb animal compared to a coyote. [laughs] They weren't that hard to catch. A fox complaint was not a big problem, where coyotes, you had to put effort in. You had to watch what you were doin', know what you were doin'.

(Is that because of the cleverness?)

Yeah. They were a lot more cunning. I use the example a lot of time, like drinking, you know, we can drink alcohol and get sick and vomit. If a coyote ever did that one time, he'd never do it

again. They don't make mistakes twice. So a lot of times, in this area here, when I first came down here, they were huntin' coyotes by the airplanes locally, you know, on their own, and they'd have these things all smarted up before they'd call me and a lot of the guys were trappin' and snarin,' they were tryin' all kind of stuff. And then they'd call you, you know, and by that time you were workin' on educated animals. So no, even uneducated coyotes were a lot smarter than fox were. Fox dens, you could walk around 'em, spit, whatever you wanted. A coyote den, you just got within 10 feet of 'em, and next morning, they're gone. So you didn't want to walk into a coyote den, either, because I never took dens until the adults were gone. Once the den was there, the adults were gonna stay there, too. A number of our guys would find that den right away and take that and then work on the adults, and it'd take you a lot longer to take care of your problem.

52:24

(So you would wait until the adults came back?)

I'd take the adults first and then take the den.

(Once they came back to the den?)

Yeah. 'Cause they still had their habits, I mean, their natural travel areas and everything going back to that den. But you take that den away, they could live any place.

(What about mountain lion in this area?)

Before I retired, about 1995, I got one mountain lion complaint, and two years before I retired, I had about three of 'em. To say positively on most of 'em, no, I had one positive one north of town here, in fact, fairly close to where Joe was livin', where a mountain lion had tore a chunk out of a cow, just flopped the hide back on her shoulder, and he had raked her on the neck and hindquarters and stuff like that. It was definitely a mountain lion. Then I had a horse one time up by South Heart that it was definitely a mountain lion, and that was probably ten years before I retired. They been around for a while. I had some pretty legitimate sightings from individuals that I knew they knew what they were talkin' about. But not much was mentioned about it, because at that time, it seemed like Game and Fish didn't want to hear about it. So we just kind of kept it to ourselves and stayed alert and educated on 'em. We seen a mountain lion one time south of Medora huntin' coyotes. So they've been in the area for, I'd say, 10, 15 years. I think we have a lot more of 'em now, but—

(So you didn't really trap them? You didn't do anything with them?)

No. I never did anything with 'em. If it was one of those things, if I had to have done somethin', or took one, the paperwork and the explanations that you'd have to make [chuckles] was unbelievable. It was kind of like wolf. We had wolves in this area also, not a lot, but they were here.

(In the early days?)

No. I seen more sign of wolves since mid-'80s than I did before the mid-'80s. Never trapped one. Snared one. Never got him the first time. Snared him again. The third time I snared him, he got