

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 corncocks 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, beebes, 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

hung up. But they're not a real smart animal either, I think when it comes to trapping— [chuckles] because although I caught him in three different areas, and three different style snares, but yeah, the first two are just like big ropes on his neck, and I got him on the third time. They were full hair and stuff, you know.

(So it didn't take until the third time, the snare?)

Yeah. The third time, it was in a bunch of little trees, and he had 'em all chewed off, unbelievable. I knew when I seen these trees, though, layin' down there, I figured I'd probably got another one, but it ended up it was the same one.

(He had chewed it off?)

No, he didn't chew the snare off. He chewed the first two off. This one here, he was still there. But he wasn't dead. 'Cause the hair and all that stuff from the other ones, the snare was kind of around that. But the first two snares I caught him in was Gregerson snares, and them locks—I never did like 'em. Some of the guys had good luck with 'em, but I never did. But then I had the last time I caught him, it was a bullet lock [?], and he was still there.

(So you didn't specifically trap wolves much?)

No. I didn't want to.

(Because of the paperwork?)

The state of North Dakota was allowed one accidental catch per year.

(For all the state?)

Yeah, for the whole state of North Dakota, and for all the trappers. So you know, it was not a good deal. I didn't need that kind of publicity. And I didn't get any publicity on this, either. But sometimes this stuff gets out, and I don't know how it gets out, because I'm usually pretty zipped up on talkin'. But you know, sometimes ranchers are with the person, and he's gotta go to the bar and start braggin' about things. [chuckles] And then next thing you know it's in the newspaper, blown out of proportion. So it's best not to make it too public.

57:40

(And it sounds like there wasn't much of a wolf problem anyway?)

No, there wasn't.

(Small amount.)

This wolf here, the rancher's wife, she had a pail calf, and she went out on a Sunday morning and was gonna feed this pail calf, and this wolf was there by her calf. He growled at her and kept movin' back and forth, and at first I thought, you know, this doesn't sound right. So I went out there the next morning and sure enough, there was tracks, it had rained the day, the morning before that wolf was there, so we had nice tracks and everything there. So I set snares for coyote

and the whole ball of wax. I figured if I'd catch him, it's accidental, because we couldn't—we weren't allowed to actually trap for a wolf without doin' a lot of paperwork. [laughs] I never was much on paperwork. If I was workin', I probably wouldn't even be talkin' about this.

([laughs])

But no, it—North Dakota, northern part of the state, when I was up in Cavalier country, I took a 95-pound coyote. I took a number of 60- to 65-pound coyotes. Up there they called 'em "brush wolves."

(But they were coyotes?)

I don't know what they were. You know, they had bigger coyotes than they do down in this area, but I think they had to have been crossed some way or another, because they weren't big enough for wolves and they weren't small enough for coyotes, so. I would say in the years I worked over there, I probably ended up with eight to 10 of 'em that were in that 60- to 70-pound range. At first you think you got a wolf. Well, it didn't really have a wolf foot, the big pads and stuff like that, the big feet and the long legs and stuff. They were just big coyotes. They didn't have a real broad forehead. They were just big animals. [chuckles] They could have been crossed with German shepherd dogs or somethin', too, I don't know.

60:08

(What work did you do with the research center?)

You're talking about the local center?

(With Denver Wildlife Services.)

Uh, that was when we were tethering lambs and puttin' 1080 collars on 'em?

(The livestock protection collars?)

Yeah, I did some work with M-44s with 'em. Padded jaw traps. A lot of work with the old coyote-getter, usin' different ones. And then we did, uh, some bait station work, survey work on coyotes, and did a lot of blackbird Avitrol experimental work. That was back in the late '60s and early '70s. In fact, even after I moved here, they would ship me over in August and for September for two or three weeks and work with Joe and Jerry and that Oakes country on blackbirds. I was always so glad when that was over with, because walkin' these sunflower fields and cornfields were always hard on my ankles. [laughs]

(In August?)

Yeah, we made a lot of miles in them fields when they had big corncobs on 'em or big sunflower heads on 'em, measuring heads and damage and all this kind of stuff, lookin' for dead birds.

61:49

(When you did work with the center, you obviously were field testing?)

Yeah. It was basically all field testing. Yeah. And then we worked real closely with the state. Down here at Hettinger, we have a sheep station, experimental station. I did a lot of work with them people also, doing different things for them. They had a school where they'd teach people sheep management, and then I had a part of it we called predator sheep management. I usually—I don't know how many of them classes I gave, probably 35-40 of 'em or so. And every time they had a new class of new sheep men, I'd come in for a day or two and talk to 'em about predators, what you can do to prevent predator problems. It ain't gonna eliminate predator problems, but it can alleviate some of your problems, when to call me, all this kind of stuff. Talked about guard dogs. We did—that was another thing we did, a lot of guard dogs and donkeys. With Denver we documented some stuff on that, so.

(And you have that one picture on your wall. (Transcription note: photo shows John sleeping in the flatbed of a pick-up.) What is that work from?)

That's from the 1080 collar. We had a sheep man north of Rhame there. We had some sheep tethered out there with 1080 collars on, and some without. Yeah, that's what we were workin' on that day.

(And you mentioned that you had been up quite early?)

Since 3 o'clock that morning. [laughs] Because when I had to leave my headquarters here at New England, and be down in that area, it took me an hour and a half to get down there, and I've always wanted to be where I was gonna be at least a half an hour, forty-five minutes before sunup, so I could locate animals and stuff like that. So I got up at 3 o'clock that morning. There was lots of mornings I got up at 3, 3:30 and left home.

(To do research, or just period?)

No, that was basically for locating coyotes before I'd fly in the morning, stuff like that.

(So pretty early mornings.)

Oh, yeah, a lot of early mornings.

64:31

(And you mentioned that in the early days particularly, you worked seven days a week. Was there any kind of comp or credit time?)

No, nothin'. We just—there was—when we first moved here, my wife felt a little bit lonely, because we moved to a new area and I was never home. She knew, the first year she knew everybody in town, I knew nobody. I spent lots of nights in motels. So yeah, 'bout late '80s, I kind of got smart and then that was about the time comp time, I think, started in, too. I found out, workin' five days a week, and I probably worked 18 hours a day some of those days [chuckles], but I was gettin' just as much done as workin' seven days a week. It coulda got to a point where there was 10 days in a week and you still didn't get caught up. So you just learned how to manage your time a little better and you—there was times when I'd put out too many traps and then you had to spend more time goin' back, checking and all that, and then you flew that place that morning and ended up killin' 'em all and then you had the traps you had to get out. You

know, it was just—sometimes you met yourself comin' and goin'. I think it was about the mid-'80s, I just took a good look at what I was doin', and I wasn't doin' it right. So then I changed my management a little bit of my time, and things worked out a lot better. [chuckles] Then I didn't—very seldom worked weekends after that, so.

66:16

But I spent, on an average, at least one night if not two nights every week in a motel in one of the areas, either Beach or Bowman or Langdon. Sometimes in wintertime I'd run my route, I'd leave here, like, on a Monday and stay in Beach on Tuesday night and Bowman Wednesday night and Langdon Thursday night and then I was back again on Friday.

(Was that pretty common the whole time you were working?)

In the wintertime, when we were runnin' M-44s and snares and stuff, because they had to be checked, you know, periodically, so it took about that long to make all my checks and get back to headquarters, I spent a lot of nights away from home. And seven counties, if you drive home every night, you don't get a whole lot done.

(No, it's too far.)

Yeah, so.

(What did you like best about your work?)

The outdoors. I'm not really a morning person, although I was out every morning. [laughs] But I've always said, you know, sunsets are just as pretty as sunrises. [laughs] And since I retired, there's lots of mornings I'll wake up at 5:30, 6 o'clock, but I won't get out of bed till 7. I just totally refuse to get out of bed till 7, unless it's an emergency where I have to.

([laughs])

But I can stay up till midnight every night. Even when I got up at 3 o'clock in the morning, I never got to bed before 11. I just had a heck of a time. Like I said, I'm a night person. But by 10 o'clock, there were certain times where I'd find a little shade tree and take a half an hour nap in the pickup. My size, you can see, I don't fit layin' down in a pickup, so I had to sit behind the steering wheel and lay my head back. But if you were tired enough, you could sleep for a half an hour that way.

(So you like the outdoors the best?)

I love the outdoors. And I still do. I've had, since I retired, an opportunity to get a job indoors, and I won't do it. I just—I like the outdoors.

68:48

(After you formally retired, did you do any work for the service?)

Well, about 1997, Canada—one of the guys from the sheep experiment station, the North Dakota experiment station, was up in Canada setting up some sheep programs. He mentioned my name

about doing some seminars on predator/sheep relationships, stuff like this, management. So I went up there in '97 and I gave probably five, six different seminars in different areas for that one week. And then in 2001 or 2002 they called me back and I went back up there for a week and a half and went all over Saskatchewan and a little bit of Alberta giving seminars on the same thing. Then Ontario called me and wanted me to come up there, and I just—I had started workin' on this house and things were just out of hand. But I love doin' that. I like talkin' about—and it's kind of—most of the seminars, they wanted at least two hours, if not three-hour seminars. At first I said, "I don't know what I'm gonna talk about." It's kind of one of these things, when you've done somethin' long enough, you don't know when to shut up. [laughs]

([laughs])

Things just keep flowin' and one things leads to another, you know. And I basically work on questions. 'Cause I want to talk about what people wanted to talk about. So I enjoyed doin' that.

(So since you've retired, you've mainly done educational kinds of things?)

Yeah, I've done 4H stuff, yeah, I've done some educational—sometimes I tell 'em to get ahold of Joe, 'cause I don't want to step on his toes, either. When I retired, I was out, you know. Yeah, I kind of in some ways miss it, but other—the flying part, I thought I would miss the most, and I miss it not at all. But my retirement, I got so many hobbies that I don't really have time—you know, and I got my grandkids in town here, and I spend a lot of time with them. I love retirement. I love it. [laughs]

71:33

(Do you trap at all?)

Nope. I sold all my guns. I got a pistol and two shotguns. I couldn't sell the shotguns, because I have to do a little bit of bird huntin'. Other than that, no. My son's got a good rifle, and now when my older grandson, he's 11 now, in two more years, I'm gonna take him out coyote callin', and then I'll probably—he can use my son's rifle, and I'll probably buy one. But I'm not sure that I need to buy one, because I don't need to shoot anything any more. I still get the excitement when the animals come in and when they answer me and stuff but I've taken kids deer hunting, beginner's deer hunting, but I don't carry a rifle. I just like to see their excitement, so. That's kind of why I retired. The last two years I worked, the excitement wasn't there no more. My coyote huntin'—we'd come in on a coyote, you know, after shootin' 20, 25 in the morning, and it was like, "It's time to go home. Enough." Wintertime—I don't know if this is for publication or not—but we shot 76 of 'em in five and a half hours, good snow cover. On the way back, I told Gary, I says, "If we see another, climb! [laughs] Don't go down!"

(That was in the plane?)

Yeah. It just, it just got to a point where enough is enough.

(You'd done it long enough, it seems like.)

Yeah. I didn't have any problems killin' 'em, it was just that the excitement wasn't there any more. I was eligible for retirement at 55, and financially things worked out for me, so I quit. And I think Joe Carpenter was glad I did, because he got to come here and work, and he loves it here.

73:49

(What did you like least about your work?)

Uh, the paperwork, political, office stuff. Sometimes the office not understanding what I was doin' out here, they thought I should be doin' somethin' a little different. Some of them kind of pressures was probably the least. And I really can't complain about that, either, because we were basically on our own out here. We seen very little of our bosses, and you know, there was a lot of correspondence, you know, by mail and stuff, but I know a lot of things that were brought up by administration was because I didn't do my paperwork good enough. [laughs] Every Monday morning I'd have to sit in the office about two and a half hours and do my paperwork, and it killed me. I just—and I guess if I had to say so, just about all the guys that are workin' today probably don't feel any different than I did. [laughs] 'Cause we are outdoor people, and I knew in my mind that this stuff has to be documented, because people rely on it for information, but for us to document it, it was hard to do. And I didn't document everything accurate. Because I'd be sittin' there by my typewriter fillin' out a report or whatever, thinkin' about 10 other things that I was gonna do that day. There was times when we had a conference and we got all these reports on how many of this and that, and I'm sayin', "This can't be right!" Well, that's what I sent in. [laughs] So that had to be my least. I love people. I still like people. That's probably one of the things I miss most, is the contact with all the ranchers and the public that I dealt with. After I retired, for about a month and a half, I don't know if it was depression, I don't know if I've ever been in a depression, but I didn't feel right, because I felt I wasn't doin' anything meaningful. But I only stayed in that for about a month and a half, and I had enough to do to forget about everything. [chuckles] And I think it was because I wasn't seein' anybody. But yeah, I still see a lot of the people I worked with at the mall and in Dickinson and stuff like that.

76:45

(This is the end of CD #1.)

76:50 End file 1

File 2

00:00

(This is CD #2 for the interview with John Plaggemeyer. We'll pick up with, what did you find most challenging about your work?)

[sighs] Basically to complete the jobs that I started. In all the years that I hunted coyotes, I only had one coyote that I never got that I went out to get. I guess that bothered me for many years. [laughs]

(But only one!)

Only that I can remember, I only had one that I needed bad and I never got him. I don't know if he died of old age or what. [chuckles] The rancher ended up sellin' his sheep. I think he was a little premature in doin' that, but I think he kind of wanted to go out anyhow. Yeah, like when I

got a complaint, I wanted to clean that up, and I wanted to clean it up fast. I would guess that was probably one of my biggest challenges. Because my wife always said, "You know, just because you got a complaint today doesn't mean you gotta be done with it tomorrow." But yeah, I wanted to clean 'em up as fast as I could and get on to the next one.

01:27

(What was the most difficult social or political situation that you found yourself in, and how did you get out of it?)

Uh, [sighs] I killed seven hogs one time on drop baits.

(Strychnine?)

Strychnine drop baits. I put out too many of 'em around a carcass. I had an old pig carcass out there, and these doggone pigs traveled for about, oh, three quarters of a mile from a farm to the hill where I had these baits, through fairly deep snow, and started dyin' on the way home.

(And you were trying to catch a coyote, I assume?)

No, these were fox.

(Oh, fox!)

And that thing got very political.

(Really?)

Yeah. Senators, state political people got involved, the Governor kind of got involved. And I'd only worked about a year and a half.

(Here?)

This was up in the northeastern part of the state. So when you talk about political, that was probably one of my biggest political challenges, trying to pacify all these people and explain what exactly happened. We had to have gates posted and sign releases and all this stuff, and I was in the right on all of 'em except one gate I posted, I posted it over the top of ice. They had a kind of an ice storm, and the ice had melted off and the wind had taken the sign off, and I ended up finding the sign about a week later, but by that time everything had hit the fan already. [chuckles] I thought I was gonna get fired. But yeah, everything worked out.

03:31

Another was when we had county participation funding. We had to go to the counties and ask 'em for money every year. I hated that. That was kind of like bein' a used car salesman, you know? That I didn't like at all. And I had a good rapport with all these people, too, but I just hated to go ask for money. And then some of these guys never made it easy for you, you know. They'd ask you questions that were hard to answer, that should have been answered by the administration. [chuckles] But towards the end, they usually sent somebody out from the office to go with you, and that was a lot better.

(When you worked here, did you have to do that, because the county was funding—?)

No, I didn't have to do that here. But when we got into financial problems, we—a good term would probably be, we “worked” the political people in the area. I got to a point where I knew all the legislators and stuff on a first-name basis, and then I got on a lot of boards in the area, too, that got me in contact with political people. After a while, I felt real comfortable in the political arena, too, with people, talkin' to 'em about it, askin' em—'cause you had—you couldn't solicit, so you had to use a little tact in your approach with 'em, but when you're on a first-name basis with these people, then it's not too hard to do. And I always made it a point to be on a first-name basis. If somebody got reelected, I got to know 'em. But I think that helped out a lot, too.

05:26

(So you actually did a lot of that?)

Yeah, I did, I did an awful lot of it. And I've done some since I retired, you know, for our office, too. Because I'm still on a first-name basis with a lot of the legislators down there in this area. There's about nine of 'em I know real well, so, Representatives and Senators.

(What's one of the funniest things that happened to you while you were trapping or capturing animals?)

The funniest thing I think has to be—and I told somebody here the other day, we were talkin' about rodents, and I am scared of mice and rats. I had a chicken farm up by Neche, it's way up in the northeastern part of the state, and that's when we had the red squill for rats and stuff. He had a rat problems. First, the question I always ask these people before I even come, I say, “What's your walls insulated with?” And dang near everybody insulated their walls with old corncobs. So I went up there and I brought a whole case of red quill with me. We walked into the chicken house and there's chickens all over the place, and I looked down at the floor, and here's there's rats runnin' over my feet and stuff. [chuckles] And I started dancin' and gettin' all excited. I danced my way back to the door. He had kind of one of these divided barn doors where the bottom'd stay and you could open the top, and I'm standin' on the back side of that, tellin' him where to put the red squill, [laughs] 'cause I was too scared to go back in there. [laughs]

([laughs])

07:10

That guy laughed, and he musta told the whole county, because when I left there, everybody was razzin' me about it. “They called a rat man down and he's scared of rats!” You know. That had to probably be the funniest thing.

(Any coyote stories?)

[pause] I'm sure there is, but right now I just—I just can't—well, we had a—I had a situation south of region, old Pete Schmalz [?], he wanted to go along with me, and he says, “I think I know where there's a den.” And I says, “There wouldn't be—” This was in mid-September. I says, “Well, there wouldn't be a den this time of year.” And he says, “Well, I'm gonna show you where this den was anyhow.” So he got in a pickup and we went out there, and sure enough, we

were goin' to the area where he said there was a den, and we jumped I think it was three coyotes. And it was a big stubble field. So I said, "Pete," I says, "You want some excitement? You put your seat belt on." I got the shotgun out and I gave that to him and I put two shells in there and I says, "We're gonna go shoot some coyotes." So we took off after 'em, and he shot two of 'em, and I got him two more shells. We ended up shootin' seven coyotes in this stubble field, it probably was a whole section of stubble field with some knobs in it and stuff. We had some kind of close calls because we hit some more shells (?) and stuff like this in the pickup. [laughs] But anyhow, that guy, he was just a little man, he was probably only about 5 foot 5 or so, and when he got out of the pickup, after we shot the last one, in fact, he just about shot a whole box of shells at these coyotes, and he only had one left, and I kept sayin', "Shoot him! Shoot him!" I run over him twice, but he was still alive. [laughs] He got up, and finally he killed him, and that was the last shell I had.

09:22

I stopped then, and that guy got out of the pickup, and he couldn't stand up for about five minutes. His legs was shakin' so bad he couldn't stand up! [laughs] From all this excitement. And then we went to his place and we were drinkin' coffee, and he picked his coffee cup up and he was shakin' so bad that he couldn't even hold his coffee cup. That's probably gotta be the funniest coyote story.

([laughs] What is one of the scariest things that had happened, besides the mice and the rats? [laughs])

That probably has to be the airplane. The incidences I had with the airplane.

(Any time there were those incidents?)

Yeah. Yeah, we were very fortunate. I never carried any life insurance until I had my first incident. And then I—that's when we stalled out that time. I found out later there's kind of a cushion on the ground of air, and the wing hit the ground and it kind of leveled us off and it bounced and we went back up in the air again.

(Was that when you—?)

Yeah, we kind of slid out of the air like this, and then the airplane—when the wing hit, we kind of leveled out and hit the ground and it give her power and we went back up again. We're just fortunate that there was no rocks or fences or hills or whatever. But I came home and I bought \$100,000 worth of life insurance. Two and a half weeks later, this spray pilot I was flyin' with, we put dual gas tanks on his airplane, meantime, in this two-week period. He filled both tanks up, and we went out, it was hot again that evening, and darn near the same thing happened again.

(Stalled out?)

Yeah, we stalled out and he recovered it right before we hit the ground. It was just a miracle that he recovered it, because we talked about it later, and he doesn't know why we didn't go in. But anyhow, I come home and I bought \$200,000 worth. [laughs] So in a month's time I ended up with \$200,000 worth of life insurance. Then things went pretty good for a while.

11:41

Then I was flyin' with a new pilot one time and saw some marmots. We had just shot this coyote. And I always pay attention to the gas gauges and the terrain ahead of us before we come in, especially with a new pilot. And I told him, I says, "There's a ridge in front of us. If you come in at this angle, you're gonna have to make a sharp turn after we come through. So, I says "come in a little hot." He came in pretty hot, but he didn't—we damn near smacked right into the bank.

(He wasn't going fast enough?)

No, he didn't have enough air speed. So he tried to bank it off, and I could, you could feel the airplane make that little slip. I don't know how close we were to that ridge, but it was about a 50-foot high ridge, and we're probably 15 feet off the ground. Not a good deal. Then there was just a number of other ones, and shootin' that strut was not a good deal, either! [laughs]

(So by far the scariest things were always in a plane?)

Yeah, it was always the airplane. And then I broke my back on a four-wheeler on the job in 1990. I was workin' on a ranch and I was watching or checkin' the cow trails for coyote tracks, because it had rained the night before. I'm goin' up kind of a draw and there was rocks in that draw and stuff. It was about a mile from the ranch. I don't know what happened, if I hit a rock or what and jerked the throttle, but it went over backwards on me. I felt my back break when it hit. I went unconscious. This happened at 12, and it was 2 o'clock when I got back to the ranch. So there's a two hour period I don't even know what happened, to this day I don't. I can remember before I passed out that I'd seen my four-wheeler layin' upside-down about a hundred yards from me. But I got back to the ranch. I had to have rode it back to the ranch, because the first thing I remember is, the guy touched me on my shoulder. I drove in his garage, I guess, and boy, that just hurt like a bugger when he touched me! [laughs] So I ended up in a body cast for six months.

14:04

Then I broke an ankle on the job, fell off a steep cliff. There was a coyote went down in a little hole and I was in too big a hurry gettin' down there and I slid down on this foot and it turned and when I got to the bottom, my foot's pointin' the wrong direction! [laughs] Yeah, I had a lot of little exciting things like that happen.

(Sounds like it.)

And it was amazing that a person out by himself all the time, you know, with 10 guys in the state like this, that more things don't happen. Cell phones really helped towards the end.

(You would carry a cell phone?)

Yeah, I always carried a cell phone and stuff towards the end. And then after I broke my back—see, this rancher had no idea where I was at, in fact, he didn't even know I was there. I had parked my pickup in an area where I had put it out of the sun, you know, behind a building, so he didn't even know I was there. So every time after that, I made sure that people knew where I was at. The same thing with flyin', I always left my wife—I wrote down all the names I was gonna

fly at that morning so that she had an idea where we were flyin,' so. I was probably one of the more safety-conscious people, but I seemed to have had a lot of problems. [laughs]

([laughs] Well, you worked for a long time, and you had a big area.

Yeah, so.

(What was your favorite lure recipe?)

[sighs] I—I guess I'd have to—I would probably say carp base and deer base.

(For coyotes?)

16:04

Yeah. And you know, with different types of ingredients with it. I did a lot of coyote trapping—I guess when I talk about carp and deer, mainly on M-44s and the old coyote-getters and stuff like that. I used a lot of urine sets. That probably was my most favorite for the coyotes, was a scent post. I used lures for drawing. I'd probably put lures in two, three different locations to a scent post area. But I had my best luck on scent posts.

(Did you make your own lures?)

Uh, I did, but I never really felt like I was real consistent at it, and some of the guys were. They'd made lots of it for a lot of other people and stuff. And that was another thing that I got in arguments with the office about, too, a lot of times, is, they thought we should be all makin' our own lures. My theory, my theory is, there's some guys that're just damn good at it, and they're the ones that should be makin' the lure. If they're makin' a lure that's workin' for you and want to keep makin' it for you, or if you want to pay 'em for it or whatever, you know, give 'em some extra for it—but I collected most of my own urine out of dead coyotes and stuff like that I shot. Some animals were pretty full of urine, and some didn't have much at all, but it didn't take an awful lot. You mix a little water with some of that stuff and it went a long ways. I used the bladders, a lot of times put the bladders in the bottle with it.

(Did you end up buying them toward the end, or did you always make 'em?)

No. Greg Simonson did a lot of—he made a lot of lures. There was a guy out of Montana that made some for me. Kirby Morgenstern [?], he made some damn good beaver lures and stuff like that. So yeah, there was enough guys that made good stuff that it seemed like there was two, three guys that were darn good at it, so I just used their lures. They had certain lures that worked real well.

(What about for fox?)

18:35

Uh, a lot of times fox, I used an egg base, kind of a rotted-down egg. You'd stop it at a certain point. That was probably one of my most favorite for fox. And then I also used urine on fox, too. Carp, any type of fish worked good on fox. Even good old sardines, you've gotta smash 'em up

and leave 'em in the sun for a few days. That worked good. It worked good on raccoons. Certain animals, certain things, you know.

(What was good for beaver?)

I'm not sure what Kirby all put in his beaver lures. Mainly castor and stuff. But whatever he put in there, it really worked good on beaver. [chuckles] So I never really questioned it. [laughs] Kirby was a young fellow yet, and he wasn't going to die on me or anything. [laughs]

([laughs])

And it didn't take much. It just took very little, a little bottle of the stuff. An ounce would last you a long time. 'Cause all you had to do was dip a stick in it. And then beaver, I caught a lot of beaver without lure, like snarin' 'em in runways and 330 Conibears in travel areas.

20:11

(What was your favorite trap to use?)

3N. We used to use, when I first started, the old Victor traps. Then we got Newhouse traps, and then Victor got a newer trap, the double-spring #3 was probably THE trap. It didn't take much area to set it in. The double spring, like this here, you know, that took a little more area to set it. You messed the area up a little more.

(And so it was the 3 Newhouse that was your favorite?)

No, it was, I'm sure it was a Victor trap.

(Victor?)

Yeah, Victor. This is a Newhouse here. No, this is a Victor trap. Yeah, this is a Victor trap.

(Why did you like your favorite more than others?)

Uh, it—the double spring—when I first started, we used the double spring like this here. I'm talkin' about double coil spring. Those are the ones that I like, 'cause you could just set 'em in a little spot, like this, whereas these here, you had to dig out for the springs and everything. It just took more area. Everybody had their preferences on how fast they wanted traps to snap. I guess I figured I wanted mine to snap fairly quick. Some liked more tension than others. But it's kind of like, if you put it in the right spot, then you're OK. But if you have it in a wrong spot, if you put a urine set and you put it too hard to the left or too far to the right or whatever, then you're gonna probably catch 'em on a half-step or something like that. And some of that stuff is hard to explain, because it's repetitious again, from experience. It's just right here. It's amazing, us guys, we can go to one another's place and we can darn near find each others' traps, and it's not that any of us had worked together and had the same knowledge. It's just that we learnt the same things from the animal.

(So you would know by the animal where someone would set a trap?)

Yeah, like Greg Simonson, I could go out there and he'd say, "I got some traps over here on this trail" or whatever, and I'd damn near know where to look for them traps on that trail. Same thing with M-44s. We basically would set 'em in the same areas, because the animals basically taught us what to do, not people. You just keep studying the animal and the animal basically teaches you what to do. But everybody's got a little different philosophy about the animals. My thinkin' about all, all animals, they're not much different than human beings. They all have their own personalities and coyotes aren't any different. You got shy ones, aggressive ones, meek ones, there's a little bit of everything out there. If you have a hard one, first you gotta find out, is he shy or aggressive or just plain dumb? [laughs]

([laughs])

24:02

And I've run into some that were just plain dumb! I give 'em too much credit. [laughs]

([laughs] And some, like the one you didn't catch, were perhaps very smart.)

Yeah. And that animal, I just had a hard time readin' him. He was all over the place. But yeah, the animals, basically—when I first started, I got a lot a knowledge from the old fellers, but the animals taught me most of the stuff I know. You had to pay attention to 'em, and they would teach you.

(Did you find that with coyotes, or with all species?)

I think pretty much all species. You just had, had to be observant and watch and listen. I watched animals play, with binoculars and spotting scopes, catch mice. I spent a lot of time watching animals, too.

25:14

(Some trappers modify their traps. Did you have any kind of modifications you—?)

No. I'm not sure in most cases that was necessary. I know a lot of individuals that did a lot of things that were extra-cautious sometimes, I don't know. You couldn't be sloppy, by no means, but I think some guys, it was overkill on some things. No, I never—if I had a Newhouse, some of them went off real easy. I modified them a little bit, I bent the—I can't think of what you call it.

(The pan?)

No, not the pan, the trigger, you know, that went in. But anyhow, I'd adjust that a little bit. But otherwise, no. If I made any adjustment, it was on that. Other than that, I didn't do much to traps. You know, you gotta have clean traps, but as far as altering a trap, no.

(How did you clean your traps?)

I boiled 'em. First, you know, I did that about three times a year. I'd use a wire brush and clean 'em up real good and then boiled 'em. And I usually boiled 'em in good hot water and then I took 'em out and then I boiled 'em in another deal with some trap dye. And it was a number of different kinds of that you could use. I tried this new stuff, it had—you dip 'em in gas with a dye.

I had big problems after that, so. [laughs] And somebody said that worked real well. So there's different philosophies again, different areas or whatever, situations. But you ended up after a while, you ended knowing what worked for you. And it maybe didn't work for somebody else but it worked for you and I always said, when it works for you, don't change. Keep it up.

27:33

(How did your trapping techniques change over the years?)

Just got better. And that came from knowing the animals better all the time. About the time you thought you knew the animal, you still had some more to learn. When I quit, after 34 years of doin' it, or 35, I was still learnin'. There was just little things that would crop up that added to your knowledge. That's what made wildlife so interesting, because you were always learnin'. You were always dealin' with somethin' different. And it wasn't that you were learning so much about the animal, you were learning about the animal in different situations. They would throw it out at you all the time. You thought you'd seen it all, but there was always somethin' different comin' up. So you had to learn how to deal with that situation, so.

(If one of your grandchildren asked you about trapping secrets that you had, if you had any, what would you tell them?)

28:46

I'm sure I got a grandson that's going to, because he's been going with Joe Carpenter a few times. [laughs]

(Oh!)

He trapped his first 'coon near here the other day. I got a feeling that it's gonna start. [laughs] Harry Olson was the first trapper that I worked with after I started, and I asked Harry, I said, "Harry, why did you set a trap there? Or "Why did you do that?" "Oh, I set one there 'cause that's a good place." Or "I did that because it works for me." He'd never tell me why until I got to know him after about a month and he'd start loosening up a little bit. But you know, when you do somethin' all the time, you take it for granted and you don't share it, you don't think it's that important. It's kind of like when you sit down and you start talkin' to somebody, all of a sudden these little things come up that they may be important to somebody else but it's not to you because you've been doin' it all the time, so. Yeah, you just continuously learned.

(So you perhaps don't have any secrets, it's more techniques?)

Yeah, I don't think I got, I don't think I ever had secrets.

(Because some trappers do.)

Yeah.

And sometimes, as you said, they don't want to be real free with that knowledge.)

Yeah.

(It sounds like you just got so used to doin' things that you weren't really sure you could explain it.)

And my techniques changed over the years. Like I said, I got better all the time because the animals kept teachin' me what to do.

(When you say they got better, do you mean you figured out better ways to set them, to place them?)

Let's—yeah, I didn't need to—you know, towards the end, I didn't need to set 10 traps, I needed to set two good ones. And that was a big difference, when you got smart enough—it's kind of like, when I first started, in one area, for catchin' a pair of coyotes, I would probably set 12, 14, 16 traps. Towards the end, it got less and less and less, and towards the end it was probably two to three in an area. It's kind of like, if you put 'em in the right place, you don't need a whole box full of traps. [chuckles] The same thing with snares. If you place your snares good in one area, you may end up puttin' 12 snares in this one area, but you got to pick a good area to set, and then you just fill that area up. Instead of fillin' up five areas, you just fill up one area. You get to a point where you're not spendin' as many hours workin' on one situation. That's where I'm talkin' about I got better.

(You got more knowledge?)

Yeah. It's strictly time and knowledge, experience. To explain that to somebody, I'm not sure how you really do that. I could go out and show somebody, but to actually explain, like, when Joe moved down here, I would explain to him where some of the denning sites were, some of the things, where to look for certain things in the area, sign, because I've been here a long time. And it paid off for him. He didn't have to go searching in a lot of areas because I kind of pinpointed some of that stuff for him. 'Cause these animals, they go into a certain terrain and they're repetitious, too. They basically do the same thing the other animals did in that area, travel areas and stuff like that, so.

33:02

(What will trapping and wildlife management be like in the next 25 to 50 years?)

I'm not sure it's gonna change a whole lot. Uh, you know, research has been workin' and workin' and workin' for better tools and new methods, but in all the 34 years I worked, there wasn't a whole lot of change. It's still ended up—when I quit, I was workin' basically the same as I did before except under a different philosophy. Otherwise, the work itself and the knowledge that I needed wasn't different from the first to the end. A lot of the philosophy changes that people have about wildlife, and I don't think that's gonna change. The philosophy's still gonna change, but I think the actual—if you want to trap—I mean, get rid of a coyote, you're gonna have—because the attitude out there isn't gonna allow you to do it the easy way. You're gonna have to take him basically the hard way and the humane way. I don't think that's gonna change.

(What were the philosophy changes that you talked about?)

Uh, being kinder to the animal that you're killing. Make sure you justify why you killed that animal. One big thing was, my attitude, my personal attitude in public about what I did. You

didn't brag about killin' things. You had to show—the public wants you to show some kind of compassion towards the animals that you're takin'. I'm not sure I showed a lot of compassion towards the animal, but I showed a lot of respect to the animals that I took.

(And that changed over the years from when you first started?)

Yeah, because when I first started, it was kind of like, kill, kill, kill. The more you kill, the better off things are. After a while, I don't know, that kind of changed. When I first started, I was an animal killer. And then I got to a point where I became what I was supposed to become, I think: an individual that controls problems.

(And was selective?)

Yeah. You had to be selective in doin' it, individual problems. That didn't mean that I had to take every coyote in the country in order to do that, so.

36:06

(And you watched that attitude, as you said, with the old-timers.)

Yeah. 'Cause I had the old-timer attitude at one time. [laughs]

(Even though you were young! [laughs])

And Bill Pfeifer, going back to him, I give Bill a lot of credit. He basically kind of got fired from the Service. It was not a good deal. He kind of got railroaded by a couple of individuals. That's a whole other story. Bill Pfeifer changed all that in the state of North Dakota. A lot of states ended up following his philosophy. They said he was about 20 years ahead of his time. We had to change. Defenders of Wildlife and Sierra Club and all these—North Dakota never knew what Sierra Club and all that is, but then all of a sudden they started opening offices in the state of North Dakota. And I don't think watchdogs are a problem. If you do your job right, they're not gonna bother you. They know that animal damage control or Wildlife Services or whatever you want to call it, they know we're the lesser of two evils. If we're not here, people are gonna take care of their problems. If they take care of their problems, they're gonna kill lots of stuff. 'Cause there's lots of things that you can concoct out there today that will kill a lot of things.

(Be a lot worse, yeah.)

Where they know that we just target certain animals in certain—well, we justify what we do.

(What are the biggest challenges that you see facing people in doing your work, like Joe?)

It's gonna get tougher and tougher. He's gonna have to justify more and more. It's gonna be more and more paperwork. Because when you're talkin' about justifying, you have to be able to justify it on paper, because your supervisor is gonna get questioned constantly. The people are gonna want to know figures and all kinds of stuff, and he's gotta be able to produce the stuff. And in order for him to produce it, we have to produce it in the field. When I think back, when I quit, they were talkin' about puttin' laptop computers in our pickups. And when I think about when I started in '65, if somebody would have told me that I needed a typewriter or anything

[laughs] in my pickup, I would have told you you're nuts. And next I would have told them to shove the job! [laughs]

([laughs])

But that's where it's come. And after I got to thinkin' about havin' a laptop computer in my pickup, I thought, you know, that's not a bad deal. I can sit down in the driveway on the way out and take care of everything and I don't have this Monday morning hassle. But I don't know if they've gotten there or not. I didn't ask Joe. They're still workin' on that, I think. But yeah, when you need a computer in your pickup to do that kind of a job, it just doesn't make much sense.

(On one level it doesn't.)

Yeah, but it all adds up. It all adds up.

39:48

(What other hobbies or interests do you have?)

Oh, boy! I got a cabin up at a lake and I love to just go up there and sit. And then there's times I like to go up there and fish. I'm on a lot of boards. I do a lot of community service-type stuff, drive ambulance, work at correctional center on an emergency basis, remodel houses. At one time I owned 12 houses in town here and rented 'em out. But I'm tryin' to get out of that business. And I love bein' with my grandkids. I can't wait till they start their basketball and football in school and stuff. [chuckles] I like the political arena. I was asked last—was it two years ago? to run for state Senate. Darn near did it, but turned it down, 'cause I'm not a Democrat or Republican. I'd have a big hassle there, so. I don't know. I got so many hobbies that I don't have much free time.

(You keep very busy.)

Yeah, I do. Like I said, I love retirement. I loved my job, but I love my retirement, too.

(And you did like your work?)

Yeah, I really—I enjoyed gettin' up every morning. I just think about—you hear about people on TV and even relations that, God, they can't wait till weekends, or they can't wait till they're done work, or they hate their jobs. I never had that problem. I enjoyed goin' to work.

(I had a trapper tell me that he loved Mondays because he loved his job.)

I didn't love Mondays, because Monday morning was paperwork! [laughs]

([laughs] That was your bad time!)

But, no, I enjoyed—but a lot of the guys do a lot of trapping and hunting on their hobbies. I never done that. I could have, but I expanded myself into other areas because I just feel that work is work and play is play, and relaxation is relaxation. And there are guys, like Joe Carpenter now, I think he does real well, doing the hunting on his spare time and everything. That's his life. But

I had other things in my life. I wanted to do other things, be knowledgeable about other things. I'm pretty well wrapped up in human services. I kind of got a soft spot for kids and older people, so I'm on a county social service board. I'm on the State Badlands Human Service board. I'm on the North Dakota Lutheran Social Service board. So right now, that's between my grandkids and human services, I'm similarly connected on the state and local level, whatever, I'm kind of deep into that, so.

(Well, we're at the end of my questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?)

[laughs] I think we've pretty well covered everything. For as long as I've talked, it's 3 o'clock already. [laughs] But no [pause] I don't know. I'm a person that till the day I die I'm gonna learn things, and that's what I found real interesting about animals. There was somethin' to learn every day about 'em. They were teachin' you all the time. Like I said, about the time you thought you had somethin' figured out, there was a different incident again or a different situation, different circumstances, and you learned some more.

(All right. That concludes CD #2 of the interview with John Plaggemeyer.)

44:15 End file 2. End of interview.