

Tom Kovalicky - Edited Video Transcript
Transcribed by Susan Kim
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We're interviewing Tom Kovalicky. And Tom has been in the Stanley area for many years and Tom, we'd love to hear more about it from you. We start at the very beginning.

Okay.

Where and when were you born and then what brought you to Stanley?

Okay I was born in September 13th which was a Friday in 1935 in a town called Passaic, New Jersey. And I left there when I was 17 years old. I spent 5 days on a train going to Missoula, Montana to start forestry school.

What made you interested in forestry school coming from New Jersey?

Well, I had an experience in life that kind of put things in focus for me. When I was 11, going on 12, I came down with polio. And I remember them taking me out of my house and putting me in an isolation hospital. And there were lots of kids there and they were all dying, or a lot of them were dying. And so, my family dentist showed up one day, and I think it might have been like more of a gesture of saying goodbye than it was saying hello. And I kind of sensed that. And before he left, he dropped the book on my lap and said this will help you pass some time. And it was a book written by Zane Grey called the Young Forester. Well, I read that book. And I said to myself, what a great lifestyle this must be to be a forester, working out in the wild. The novel impressed me so much about what a great lifestyle healthy people could have fighting wildfires and poachers and, um, and outlaws and timber thieves in the west. And I said if I ever get out of this hospital that's what I'm going to do.

That's great.

And that's what prompted me to go to college. Otherwise, I probably never would have been motivated to try college because where I was living, we just didn't have that kind of encouragement. It was get a job out of high school or go in the military or whatever. And I'm the first one in my family to ever go to college. And that's how I got to Missoula.

So then, what took you from Missoula to Stanley?

Well, it was a forest service career. I um, I got there in a pretty circuitous route. I started college in 1953. So, I got drafted in my senior year because I was already in my fifth year. I was a, yeah it was my fifth year, I was a senior. I had already used up my four-year deferment, so I served two years in the Ninth Infantry Division, and we were originally drafted for the Laotian conflict which preceded the Vietnam conflict. And it was a whole different scenario. It was more of a police action type thing than it was an open warfare. I then went back to college, which would have been 1960, and started smoke jumping and that delayed everything another couple of years. So, I finally got everything together, got out of college in 1961 and I was on my way to Laos to drop cargo for Air America when I got a, uh, offer from the Forest Service to start a professional career. So, I canceled out on

the Air America, uh, phase of my career and, uh, took my first professional job with the forest in Pinedale, Wyoming and started my career there as what they call a Junior Forester. And I spent, I spent from '62 until '65 in Pinedale working on the Bridger National

Forest. And then I was asked to take a job in Rock Springs, Wyoming with the Forest Service. The Bridger National Forest again. So, I stayed in Rock Springs, and I had a gorgeous ranger district, the west slope of the Wind River mountains. I had a huge chunk of the Bridger Wilderness. Lots of cows, lots of sheep, lots of elk, deer, antelope, bighorn sheep. A thousand lakes and almost all of them had fish in them. Gorgeous part of the world. So, um I stayed there and then I got an offer from the Forest Service to come to Stanley, Idaho.

And what year was that?

That would have been 1970. You didn't apply for jobs inside the Forest Service, they were given to you. And they would say we want you to go here, or we want you to go there and, of course, you could talk it over with your family and if it didn't fit, you know, they would make adjustments. But generally they expect you to go where they sent you.

Were you familiar with Stanley at that point and were you excited?

No, I had never been to Stanley and uh so I accepted the job, and I arrived here, it was May of 1970, when I drove in through lower Stanley looking at the Sawtooth Mountains for the first time in that gorgeous scenery where you turn the corner in lower Stanley and all of a sudden there in Upper Stanley is the mountains. And it was May with all the snow. And I had just come from the Wind River range which was enormous, and I thought that they were the most gorgeous place on earth, and I said you can't beat this and here I turned the corner and I saw what I saw. I said oh my God this is, this is awesome. And you had the Salmon River running by. And, of course, the ranger station was at the base of the town of Stanley and, well between lower Stanley and Stanley. And so I was able to drive right to my house that the government was going to provide for me, which is now the museum for the Sawtooth Interpretive Historical Association. And before I forget, I was the last Ranger to live in that house.

Really?

Yeah. So, my welcoming was the Sawtooth peaks with all the snow on it and the Salmon River. It was a gorgeous day, absolutely gorgeous day when I arrived there. And it stayed gorgeous until about the 1st of June. And the town Chamber of Commerce had a picnic on Memorial Day weekend and they invited me to come down for that. And if I remember correctly, it was nearly, nearly 90, or approaching 90 degrees that day. And we were having this town picnic and playing horseshoes. And that's how I got to meet a lot of the locals almost instantly. Where my house was then, is also where my office was. That's what the Interpretive Association is using for office space now, that was my Forest Service office.

So, it's the building behind the museum, basically?

Yeah, right, that was the, where we, where we had our office. And then we were starting in the process of building the new office. That's the one that everybody's familiar with today, about a mile out of town up on the bench. So that's how I got to Stanley and that's how I was welcomed here with beautiful weather, great scenery, real friendly people, and then started my career here.

And what were your responsibilities? What were you brought here to do?

Well, a couple of things. One was they wanted somebody who had experience with grazing and somebody who had experience with wildlife. And since my degree was both forestry and wildlife habitat management, with also a minor in range management, I kind of fit that uh bill. And my ranger district was quite a bit different than what you would know today. The Stanley Ranger district stopped at the edge of Sawtooth Lake and went all the way over to the divide between Grandjean and Stanley. And then from the divide from Grandjean, it went all the way down to what we call Boundary Creek and Dagger Falls. But it was always on the uh, on the uh, let's see that would be the uh east side of the Salmon River. Okay?

Hmm hum.

And it would follow the Salmon River. The middle of the river was the boundary all the way down to a place called Redside Rapids, and then up over the top of the mountains back up to Sunbeam and then Sunbeam over to the edge of the White Clouds, and then back over to Redfish Lake.

That's a huge territory.

It was a huge ranger district. Probably about, probably in the neighborhood of a million plus acres.

Wow. How many other Rangers were there helping you with this?

Well, I was the only Ranger here. I was, the ranger is kind of the boss or the CEO. And then I had a staff.

How many staff?

I didn't have a big staff then. I had a secretary, Jalene Steel [spelling unknown]. I had a, what we call a general district assistant, Bill James, who was a local boy from Challis. And I had a forester, Bruce Kaufman. And I had a range assistant, uh Dave Kimpton. And, um...

Were they here when you got here, or did you hire them individually as you met them?

I hired Bruce Kaufman when I got here, and I hired Dave Kimpton when I got here. The James boy, oh and Mel Sanderson, who was my fire, in those days we call 'em the fire control officer, he was here um along with Jalene Steel and Bill James and myself. And then, but I had a huge summer crew that came to work for us to do the different jobs like trail crews and back country wilderness. In fact, John Rember was one of my wilderness rangers in those days. And uh let's see, we had a helicopter crew here. I had my own helicopter here for two years. And that was a big advantage for not only fighting fire but doing other jobs, you know. So that was the makeup, and then they broke the news that they were going to build a new office in Stanley to upgrade us to get ready for the potential Sawtooth National Recreation Area if it passed. And of course, it did pass.

So, and what year was that?

1972. We built a new office in 1971 and when we moved into it, we were still the Stanley ranger district and about halfway through the year the legislation passed that September. And so, we were then part of the National, Sawtooth National Recreation Area, which basically did away with uh five ranger districts and three national forest or parts of them, because the new boundaries overlap. That' be a better way to say it, the new boundaries overlap portions of three national forests and five ranger districts, so they had to be reconfigured. And as a result of that move, we grew enormously in uh job responsibility, budgets, and staffing. I was then moved to Ketchum, Idaho, where I became part of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area hierarchy. And uh that would have been '73 when I got to Ketchum and I was then given the title of um assistant superintendent for administration, meaning I guess in a common term a super ranger for the entire area with three assistants. One was Dave Lee, one was Dave Kimpton, and the other one was Jerry Green. And we broke the SNRA up into three units, a lot different than it is today. One was called the Stanley unit, one was called the Wood River or Hailey unit, and the other one was called the uh Wilderness unit. And the Wilderness unit had their headquarters in um Fourth of July Creek, which was one of the Ranger districts that was broken up just like the Stanley district was broken up. Those rangers didn't exist anymore. The other unit was kept in Hailey, which was then called The Wood River ranger district, but we kept the office in Hailey, but he had duties inside the area here. So that was the new organization along with uh a complete staff of um uh planners. We had a uh forest planner who did planning for the entire unit, and that was uh Lynn Sprague who was the ranger at Fourth of July Creek when the SNRA come along. We had a full-time minerals director, they were called directors, uh we had a full-time uh landscape architect and recreation planner, that was Norm Malone. Harry Young was the minerals director and um I had a full-time law enforcement director, his name was Cecil Wilson. I had a secretary; her name was Sandra Brown. And I had a big staff there in the office including a wildlife biologist, a fish biologist, which was Greg Munther, and a part-time archeologist, Art Selig [?] out of the Twin Falls office. So, we had a big new organization and money was not a problem. We had a lot of money, and we had a lot of energy to get things moving towards doing what the act asked us to do. Basically, we were to keep the anadromous steelhead and chinook habitat intact which was then in conflict with timber cutting, road building, mining, and grazing activities. That was one of our bigger assignments, was to get a handle on that sort of stuff. So, the one item, the one man I left out of the equation was Gray Reynolds who was called the superintendent of the Sawtooth SNRA. He indeed was the key figure, the key administrator. I was his uh day-to-day administrator and the other people were his specialists. So that's how we were organized. And the new office became the headquarters for the Stanley zone, and we closed everything down where the museum is. The reason we closed that house down was that when they plumbed it years ago, the septic system was in the flood plain and it flushed right into the

Salmon River. So, we closed that Ranger Station down including the house. And then years later, I think, yeah years later, they hooked it up to the sewer lagoon system to make it more, you know, compatible with the environment. So that's the story on how the Sawtooth SNRA got started.

When the ranger station, when the house was in use, didn't you have problems with hippies there? And wasn't there a hot springs or something?

Yeah, right in the backyard of the ranger station was a beautiful uh natural hot springs swimming pool put in by the CCC boys with a log cabin dressing room.

And the CCC boys are?

The Civilian Conservation Corps from the 1930s. President Roosevelt's uh depression team. They... it was gorgeous. It was uh cement and tile lined. Uh had beautiful hot water. Sat and looked right at the Sawtooth Mountains. And um what happened was that over the years, when the valley had a small population, locals and forest service people alike used it and there were no restrictions because everybody kind of did their own policing thing. And then in the late '60s, early '70s

Stanley got discovered by what we call the hippies, you know the hippie crowd, uh whatever that is, you're not sure. But people would come and camp out in Stanley Basin all summer. They were looking at this as an escape because there was no law here and the forest service were the only people who wore badges in those days. And...

There was no Sheriff or...?

There was a sheriff, but we very seldom saw him. We saw State Police once in a while during the holidays and that was about it. But there was no town cop. Uh but you could imagine the problem with that many people using that pool and then getting into the drugs and getting into the pollution with soap and human waste and other paraphernalia laying around, partying in there um probably uh 20 hours a day. It got to be a real headache for all of us, especially me. And uh what brought the thing to a crescendo was a bunch of 'em were drunk and on drugs in the middle of the day at noon standing naked on the uh, on the roof of the bathing or uh the hut to change your clothes in, when the County, one of the County Commissioners' wives drove by and they mooned her. Well, she drove to Challis at a thousand miles an hour, got a hold of the forest supervisor, whose name was Wes Carlson, and told him the story. So, he called me up and he said what are we going to do about it? And I said, well this might be the perfect reason to shut it down. So, what I arranged for was, we very quietly took the bathing house down and people didn't say anything. And we carted off all of the debris. And then I arranged with the Highway Department to come in late at night with dump trucks of pea gravel and fill the pool with pea gravel. And to this day you can see the steam and the hot water you know bubbling out of the ground there. So, that's how we solved that dilemma. And, of course, everybody in town went berserk about the federal government, you know, ruining their lifestyle. Well, we probably did, but it had to be done in order to preserve some form of semblance cuz I wasn't getting much sleep cuz I was sleeping then there I was still in that house you know when

we did this. So, it got to be, you know, little bit of a headache, but that's the story on the hot tub. And you got to remember in those days Stanley only had 39 people who wintered here. In the summertime, we probably had, I would say, under a thousand people who came here to work and play and open up businesses like, this was the headquarters for the outfitting industry, to not only float the main Salmon River but the Middle Fork River. So, there was a lot of activity here with young people. And there were three bars. Every one of them had live music and every one of them drank every legal hour they could and then some. And we had restaurants here. We had a restaurant in the Kasino Club. We had a restaurant in the Stanley Club, which was a log cabin bar which is, was right across the street from the post office which burned down. And we had the Rod and Gun Club. And then we had a little bar out on the highway called Howdyville which is now called Elk Mountain. And that bar would uh, would be going. So, this town was a party town. There was no fire department. There was no ambulance crew or EMTs, what they called them then. Uh there was no law, except for the forest service.

Did you have to try and enforce any of the law or did you just party with the rest of them or how did you engage?

If there was a need to do something, in order to hang on to a situation until the sheriff got up here, we did that. Uh we did all the search and rescue work. We did all the ambulance runs in the back of my private station wagon cuz the forest service did not have anything here to take victims to Sun Valley with and we had a lot of victims. Uh the cops would come up here over the uh the busy weekends and the big holidays because drugs were a big deal up here then. Alcohol was a big deal. And the Stanley Stomp came into focus in those early '70s. You know, I mean when Stanley, a town of 39, makes the front cover of National Geographic Magazine with local people dancing on the tables in the bars you know you hit the big money, the big time. This town was very exciting, very colorful. Uh fist fights constantly, lots of guns being carried.

Were there gunfights in the streets?

Well, I'm not aware of any gunfights in the streets but there were a lot of guns being shot up in the air, you know uh not at people but up in the air, especially over the holiday season. Cuz there was nobody here to stop you. I remember quite vividly Bruce Kaufman, who was my timber forester, being attacked by a holdup man in the middle of Stanley at roughly about 1:00 in the afternoon. And uh the robber was thwarted by his wife who was coming out of the post office and hit the robber with her purse. And the guy got so excited he ran off. But that was just a mere crack in what was really happening here because with live music going uh almost every night of the week there was a lot of reason to come here dancing. And when the bands weren't here, the juke boxes were going, you know early in the morning until who knows when. But uh the ambulance thing was very interesting because we in the forest service were required to have first aid training. So us, along with some of the locals who had first aid training, unofficially would pick up a victim put him in the back of my station wagon and take him to uh Sun Valley, because that was the nearest hospital. That's when Marie uh come along.

Marie Osborne?

Marie Osborne came along and organized her first uh effort and there was no clinic here, but she organized us into taking the first 81-hour courses offered. You had to take 81 hours of training to get the EMT qualification and I remember Bruce Kaufman was in that class and Dave Kimpton and myself and Bill James and some other local people. And there was no more than six or seven of us who ran what Marie then got for us was a World War II Pontiac ambulance that no one was using at the uh Mountain Home Air Force Base. And we kept it up at the new ranger station. And when the call came in, and it usually came into my home or Marie's home, and then Marie would immediately round up people, no matter what time of the day it was, to take the ambulance to where the accident was and then take the victims over the hill to Sun Valley. And we did that for geez, probably from 1971 and a half until the first ambulance, the new ambulance was bought, and the clinic was bought, whatever year that was. Had to be after 1976 sometime, '77, '78, somewhere in there. So that was the ambulance EMT started here. Other than that, people kind of took care of themselves here. If there was a baby due, there were, there were women around who knew what to do if that was needed. Uh John Rember's mom, Betty, was a registered nurse, so... And there were other women in the valley who had a hands-on experience with uh you know trauma. So, you know we kind of took care of ourselves in those days. Didn't have to worry about knife wounds or gunshot wounds. Uh I think those came afterwards, but not while I was here.

And who are, who are some of your most memorable characters that you spent time with? Are there any adventures or characters that really stand out in your mind?

Well, the whole damn town. If you were looking for characters, you'd have to put a badge on every one of them. Because we had people like Casanova Jack, uh who ran the music and owned the bar, what was now called the, well it was always called the Rod and Gun, but the locals always named it the God and Run Club. And uh he was a rock and roll guy, with kind of an Elvis Presley cowboy demeanor and he dressed the roll. And his girlfriend was named tall Mary because she was 6' 5", 6'4", something like that. And uh that bar was unreal. They played fast music and cowboy music. Uh he was a character that you won't find anywhere except in a novel. And Wayne Willard, who ran the Stanley Club, was a character like you wouldn't believe. Uh he could have easily been in the movies. And then you had the folks who ran the Sawtooth Hotel, the Cole family. And if that wasn't a pair to draw to, uh the old older couple who ran that hotel, I don't know who would be. I mean this town was salted with these people. You had the uh, you had the uh people like Starvin Marvin, who was a logger, who would turn his truck upside down on the snow at Grandjean and then pull it with a caterpillar up and over the top of the summit on top of the snow so that he'd be here early to go logging. And then flip the truck over to the other side so that it would be ready to run again. You had the Crane guys, uh Earl Crane, who was a smalltime logger who stood about 6'5" probably weighed 230 lbs., tougher than rawhide, who hung out in this town and was eager to fight anybody who wanted to be fought. And then we had Dan

Woolly, who was as big as Earl Crane was, and was a cowman out of the East Fork country, who had the cabin that his father had, as the ranch across the river from lower Stanley. Uh this went on and on. I mean any given night, any given day you had characters here.

Did they all pretty much get along or were there different factions and different groups or did everyone just sort of party together?

I would say that when it came party time, everybody was buddies. Uh there might be differences with the forest service between 8 and 5 but after 5:00 in the evening, generally everybody was on the same page. But uh we had lots of barbecues. We had lots of festivals. The town was totally unorganized. The only semblance of organization was the Chamber of Commerce. The mayor's office was, I mean that was defunct. Uh their biggest concern was the fear that the Sawtooth National Recreation Area is going to ruin their lifestyle.

Um you mentioned as uh one of your responsibilities um the fish and can you tell me more about the fishing days then and in in comparison to now and also the animals, the elk and the deer and so forth?

Well, start starting with the elk, uh when I got here, I didn't think there were hardly any elk here because I came from parts of Montana and Wyoming where the word elk meant something. And uh I had, like on my ranger district in Wyoming, I had 5,000 elk.

Wow.

And we knew that from surveys, I didn't make that up. I got here and um I, after my first summer of moving around, hardly saw any elk or any elk sign and I hardly saw any deer uh or deer sign. I didn't see any large groups of deer until I got down on the Middle, uh Middle Fork of the Salmon River and then I saw lots of elk and I saw lots of deer. But up here in the basin, I hardly saw anything that I could get excited about in terms of, okay, I can hardly wait for elk season to start.

Right.

Some of the locals who knew the habits of the elk, local elk and local deer, were always quite successful but they as a rule were in the minority. And in those days, they had what they called the Hunter's Ball, which was a huge three-day drunk in downtown Stanley. They would start off the night before the opening day. People would drink and fall over by the hundreds, and you wondered how they ever got to get up and go hunting. But um I don't remember a lot of successful people coming into town and I'm sure there were. But after I left and we made certain adjustments in cattle and sheep grazing, talking to some of the people that live here then, elk numbers jumped up considerably. And I think I know why now. That's because the sheep numbers and the cattle numbers were being grazed at too many animal unit months in the summertime, leaving nothing for the elk to reach for the wintertime. So, they slowly and finally moved out of there. I think if you go back before my time, you might have found out that uh there might have been more elk and deer here before the ranges got loaded up with uh too many cows and too many sheep. Uh the salmon when I got here, my first summer here, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the chinook salmon running up Valley Creek

by the hundreds and running up the main Salmon River going up toward uh Decker Flat in the hundreds. In fact, we had a season, let's see I fished for them in the '70, '71, '72, '73 that I clearly remember fishing for them legally uh with a season. And after that, I think '77 might have been the last year they fished for chinook here legally. And the reason was, is that the large dams on the lower Snake River were starting to kick in and they were killing more fish than they were allowing to survive going down into the ocean and coming back from the ocean. So yeah, I saw the decline here of salmon and steelhead like you wouldn't believe. And trout fishing was not that good here. Trout fishing was uh, for rainbows and cutthroats, was not a big event. Uh bull trout, yeah, there were a lot of bull trout around in those days cuz they traditionally hung out with the anadromous fish, eating the eggs of the salmon and the steelhead. Uh, and they of course got, eventually got in trouble too. So, you know there was a big, a big change here and one of the big culprits that we found out was irrigation practices in the upper Stanley Basin were very detrimental to spawning of steelhead and chinook. The ranchers in those days took a lot, a lot of water out of the headwaters, drying up the creek or drying up the main Salmon River. And then there were no headgates or screens to keep the fish from spawning in irrigation ditches, which were then left dry. And all those fish died.

Um what was your favorite assignment, what was your favorite, the favorite project that you worked on? And would you do anything differently looking back in time? Would you do anything differently with any of the projects than you did?

Uh yeah um I would do things differently. I would have acted more vigorously, and I would have gone at a much faster pace. I was naive enough to think that when you left an assignment, and you left a program that was working, you left it together. It's like a windmill that brings up 80 gallons of water per minute. Why would you dismantle the windmill and bring up 40 gallons a minute? Uh my favorite assignment was bringing into focus uh the recreational values that this area has, that were either being neglected or slowly uh being eroded by a lack of concern by both government and non-government forces. Uh people took for granted a long time what was here and the Sawtooth SNRA act was really a brilliant piece of legislature designed to hang on to pieces of Idaho that will never ever change, including the very controversial aspect of buying out the rights of private landowners to not subdivide their land. That was not popular. By the time I left, I had spent over \$20 million of public money buying up the rights of ranchers who could have turned this into subdivision mecca. In fact, one of the big chunks of money we spent was buying out a large part of the Obsidian subdivision. There was already 50, 60 or more houses out there that we bought and got rid of before anything else happened. Uh what we did was took a look at what each piece of private property had to offer for the future, and then worked with those landowners and said look at, we'll buy your subdivision rights but you may retain one more parcel for another house, you may return or retain something for say a dude ranch you may retain something that uh would be a recreation uh business uh down the road. But we want to buy the rest of your rights. We're going to give you cash.

You keep the property, and uh deed. You may sell it, and you may give it to your heirs, but you can't subdivide it. And we'll pay you at that property value, which if I remember right was probably 95, 96, 97% of appraisal.

Wow.

So, for the money in those days it was a good deal because a lot of the ranchers up here had at best, a summertime opportunity to graze cattle. They couldn't put up enough hay here to raise cattle or keep cattle here over the winter. In fact, traditionally they never did that. So, for rancher A, landowner A, to get a million dollar check in the 1970s was a big deal. Sure, you lost your right to subdivide, but you were also giving up a piece of your heart for the future. You were saying, yes, I believe in Idaho so much that I'm willing to keep the Sawtooth Valley a model ranching community, or a model uh scenic part of Idaho. And it's working. I mean that part worked. I was very proud of that, that we were able to do that despite all the negative, uh the negative talk we had about going that, going on. And it was tenseful. It was a lot a lot of tension going on. Now I notice today that tension's gone you know.

Yeah.

It's not here today. People have learned how to live with the new uh the new way of life here. Although I'm going to predict that the next uh era will be landowners who have these properties who want to revert back to the right to subdivide them. There's going to be people here who are going to try to either politically or through the court process unwind the ball of twine that created the SNRA. The forest service today has people in it who are looking at their careers and their political placement more than they are the resources. We have people who are now politically biased, politically based and you don't know where they're going to be 10 years from today in regard to keeping this ball of twine from unwinding.

Well, Tom, I think those of us who live here and enjoy it here owe you a huge debt of gratitude for creating this place as it is, as we like it today.

Yeah, that's nice to hear, that's nice to hear that.

It's true, so thank you very much.

Yes, you're welcome.

We appreciate it.

Yeah, a lot of forest service people will be glad to hear that, believe me.