

Idaho Panhandle Oral History Project
Interview with Fred Murphy
October 20, 1979
Coeur d'Alene Marina
Interviewed by David Barton
Questionnaire Information

FM = Fred Murphy
DB = David Barton

Tape 6; Side 1

30: ...over 55 years. Started out here on the steamers I run the big old steam boats for quite a long time till they went out of vogue. Then I started my own little business.

DB: Which steam boats did you work on?

FM: The first steamer was the Montana.

DB: The Montana?

FM: And, her predecessor was one of the fastest boats in the country. In those days. It did over 22 miles an hour.

DB: Which one was that?

FM: That was the Montana I. The one I worked on was the Montana II. I was...my dad skippered the I. It was more of a deluxe fast, boat. What it was was a private yacht, that was shipped here from the coast. It was used for log towing.

DB: Was this paddle wheel type?

FM: No, no! This was 65 feet long and nine feet wide.

DB: This was screw steamer?

FM: ...Carried 450 pounds of steam.

DB: When was it built, do you remember?

FM: I don't know when it was built because...well, my dad running it in 1904.

DB: 1904?

FM: 1903-1904, somewhere in that area. Right in that area.

DB: Well, when were you born?

FM: Eight.

DB: 1908. And when did your folks come out here to the Panhandle area?

FM: Well, I would say that dad and grandparents. In fact, well I did see a grandmother...never saw a grandfather. They must have been around here before 1900. Somewhere in that category. I'm not sure.

DB: And, you have lived here all your life?

FM: Yea, I was born 'n bred, within a mile from where I sit right now.

DB: What did your father do for a living before he was a boat pilot?

FM: Well, he was...he was in the service as a harbor master at Sebu during the Spanish-American War and then when he came

back to this country he worked a little while on the Great Lakes. Then he come in to this country. Really, I don't know.

DB: You said that you lived about a mile and a half from here when you were born. What area was that in?

FM: Well, it's north Fifth Street.

DB: North Fifth Street?

FM: In fact, it is right in the middle where the freeway goes; that's where our home was.

DB: What kind of a neighborhood was it?

FM: Rural, paved roads, no sidewalks. From midtown to up there, there was one little bit of a grocery store up there. That grocery store did have a telephone. Most of the people, in those days, never had a phone.

DB: Did a lot of your relatives live near by at that time?

FM: No. My father's parents lived within a block of us, but...oh, about that time they were all gone. They were timber cruisers back East, father's parents were.

DB: Did you know anybody who had been a homesteader back in those days?

FM: Sure, oh, lots of people.

DB: What was involved in the process of homesteading?

FM: Well, I guess, now the old Number One Homestead, up in the St. Joe River...it's still there, of course, it's been broken up, that was the first homestead let on the Indian Reservation. And, I guess, all you had to do is to file on these, if you got a chance to file on them, and then you do so much improvement work a year. Building a shack or something. Do a little improvement each year and then it was your property.

DB: How long would that take usually, to get..make it your property?

FM: Legally, I couldn't say. It seems to me like maybe 10 years or something.

DB: Was the house that you lived in; where you were born at, part of a homestead?

FM: No. The people who homesteaded that whole area were the Best family. Homesteaded all that north end of town, Best Hill; oh Christ, there was 100s and 100s of acres in the Best family's homestead out there. They were...have some Indian blood. Some of them, some of them relatives and stuff were quite Indian, others, were, ah, quarter or eighth, something like that.

DB: Do you have any idea when they moved into this area?

FM: Well, I used to hunt with the old grandpa, when I was a little kid. And they came in here from Montana country. I can't tell you when it was. It would have been, I would say probably, 80, 90 years ago.

DB: Your first house that you lived in, what kind of house was it?

FM: A little frame house. Three rooms.

DB: Three rooms. How were the rooms...?
FM: That's when I was young, a kid.
DB: Right. How were the rooms lined up?
FM: Well, just a little...two rooms, and one off this way.
DB: I see. So it was like an L shape.
FM: Well, more..let's see, more like a T shape, I guess.
DB: T shape. What were the different rooms used for?
FM: Kitchen, bedroom, and living room.
DB: How many people lived in the three room house?
FM: Well, there was three of us children. And of course, my
parents.
DB: Was it made out of white pine?
FM: Well, it was made out of...when we remodeled it, it was
made out of white pine, but we did remodel it and build it
bigger later.
DB: When was that?
FM: Put electricity in, and stuff. Well, I must have been
about 16 years old, 17, when we remodeled it.
DB: Were a lot of houses like that, in the town?
FM: Yes, yes. See, we didn't have electricity or anything out
there. For a long time.
DB: You say there were more houses like that than the larger
style mansions and stuff like that?
FM: Well, this was back out near the edge of town. And, at
that time...well, there was a few houses, I would say
within a quarter mile of us, that were pretty large two
story houses. Not fancy houses, or anything, just larger
houses.
DB: When did you move across the lake to where you live now?
FM: About 45 years ago.
DB: 45 years ago. Did you purchase that land, or was that land
that your family had owned?
FM: Well, no. It had nothing to do with my family. I got
married, and I wanted to get out of town. Of course, I'd
always lived on steam boats and tug boats, and I didn't
like too many people around. You know what I mean. It's
not that I dislike people, I just don't like too many of
'em. I like to, rather, choose my, you know. So I bought
a five room float house. I was running steam boats, then.
DB: Back 45 years ago--50 years ago?
FM: Yes. Well, no. This is...I steamboated a long time.
About the time I got married, I didn't run steam boats more
than a year or two, after that. I did go back on them
during World War II, to help the effort, because there were
no young fellows around here, and didn't have help. So, I
went back on the steamer helped them clean up the logs.
Things like that. Spent several week up there to help them
out. Which I did.
DB: Just to get a better picture, could you tell us the kinds
of occupations you had and the general times you worked
them, as you were growing up into adulthood?

FM: Well, from the time I started on the boats, you mean?
DB: Hm-hm.
FM: I started on 'em when I was 16 years old. And the first boat I run was a boom launch for the Coeur d'Alene mill. Which was right over at the foot of the hill.
DB: Was that a Potlatch mill?
FM: No, no, that was...belonged to Fred Herrick. The Herrick organization. And then, I run that boat for quite a while, I worked in the engine room most of the time. Then I run...I skippered it for quite a while. And then 1929 come along and all the mills went down.
DB: What happened to the mills at that time?
FM: No market.
DB: No market?
FM: No market. People...I tell you, people were putting logs in the river up there, in the Coeur d'Alene River; I had a boom in there picking up logs for the mills, another mill up there had a boom. This fellow come down there with his team, and his wagon and his load of logs on it, you know. I said: "How much they are paying you for that--those logs?" Well, he says, "I logged them off my farm. And when I put them in their boom there they pay me \$9 a thousand. Now they are paying up to \$500 a thousand for stumpage standing in the woods."
DB: So, as of '29 you were still working for that company?
FM: Oh, yes. Well, ah, I switched from the Coeur d'Alene...when the mills shut down, most of them, then I switched and I went to work for the Lafferty Towing Company. And I run several of their boats, through the years.
DB: At the start, were those still steam boats?
FM: Yes.
DB: And when did they start gasoline engines, or diesel engines?
FM: Oh, I'd say, they started in the late '30s, early '40s.
DB: And up to that time they were using mostly...?
FM: Mostly steam.
DB: Steam?
FM: For small boom launches, gasoline.
DB: Of the steam-powered boats out there, which were paddle wheel and which...?
FM: No paddlewheel tugboats. The paddle wheels were all passenger boats.
DB: How long did they last?
FM: Well, I buried the last one. The steamer Harrison. She used to pick up passengers at a walkup at Windy Bay; they would come in by rail, of course they didn't have any bridges across that big lake. And she'd take the freight and cargo, take it from there to the city of Harrison, and they'd put them on the rail that goes into the mining country. That's the only way they had...and they used to take 1500 passenger a day out of this town. Take 'em to

Harrison, put them on the rail, for the mining country, or out East, you know.

DB: Where would the people come from? How far away would they come from then?

FM: I don't know. Everywhere, everywhere.

DB: Do you think it got so popular because of advertising or just word-of-mouth?

FM: No, I think it was just, a new country opening up, the mines were just booming, starting to boom. The lumbering was just coming into bloom, you know. And people were just starting to do what they are doing 10 times too much now--getting out of the big places.

DB: You said that you laid the Harrison to rest. What do you mean by that?

FM: Well, let me describe the Harrison. She was a big, stern wheeler. I can't say accurately what her length was, but I would say it was a 100, 120 feet, something like that. A pretty good sized boat. Beautiful, beautiful. Well, she laid...they used her for this railroad depot on her, see. Then when they built the bridge they didn't need her, so they pensioned her off. And she was laid up there at the city of Harrison, for years, just tied up. Well, then a group of people bought her and they were going to make an excursion boat out of her.

DB: Remember what year that was, about?

FM: Well, yes. I was on...I did that barging...let's see, I was on the steamer Montana, so I must have been about 18 years old. So if you go back from '72, you will see when that was. That's about how long it was. But, this group got ahold of this boat and they dolled it all up and they were going to use it for an excursion boat. Today, it would have been a gold mine, with no roads around, to speak of.

DB: No what?

FM: No roads.

DB: No roads.

FM: People were just starting to buy automobiles. They didn't want to ride the boats. They had to ride the boats all their life. They wanted to drive, on Sunday afternoon around in their cars. That's the reason that boat didn't go over. So, they...I'm sure they burned her for insurance. We took this big hull and cleaned it up, and made a barge out of it. And we barged lumber from Harrison to Coeur d'Alene.

DB: You bought it back from the excursion people?

FM: No, we didn't buy it, the company I worked for, the Coeur d'Alene Mill.

DB: I see.

FM: And then our competitor went up there and sunk it on us, one night, when we had about 150 thousand feet of lumber on

it. Well, there was no way to raise it, and there wasn't enough use for it, so I towed it from Harrison to down, just three miles from here. It's still there. I rammed her stern up on the bank and she laid there, settled down at the bottom and that's where she is today.

DB: Where are the other steam paddle wheels?

FM: The Georgie Oaks is over here in North West Storage. I think I know where the Miss Spokane is.

DB: Is the Georgie Oaks submerged?

FM: Oh, yes. They burned it. We used to take those boats out and burn them. ~~Because there was no use for them.~~

DB: Did you have a special celebration with them?

FM: We did. Burned some of them on the Fourth of July, thing like that.

DB: What decade was that during?

FM: God, it's hard to remember back that far, you know?

DB: But, would you say in the '20s or the '30s, now?

FM: Yea, yea. Now it would have been, I think when the Oaks was burned it had been right around in the '20s. Maybe early '30s. I know when they burned her I was up the lake on a steamer.

DB: Was it a big festival or like a celebration?

FM: Oh, Fourth of July.

DB: Fourth of July.

FM: When they burned her they pret' near got in trouble with it too.

DB: How do you mean trouble?

FM: Well, they set it afire out there, and they didn't have any hold on it and the wind got it and damn lucky it didn't drift back on the city. They burned one more out there and they had a little trouble with it.

DB: How did they set fire to it?

FM: Well, the one that I set fire to was the old Flyer. She was about a 120 footer, but she was a screw type. Beautiful boat. Oh, we just took the machines out of her and I pulled her out there about a mile from the Potlatch Mill and we poured a bunch of coal oil on her and threw a match.

DB: The paddlewheel in front of the museum in North Idaho, what boat is that from?

FM: That's the old Idaho.

DB: That's from the Idaho?

FM: That was burned at Flat Rock.

DB: Back in the '30s also?

FM: Oh no, that was way before, I'm pretty sure. Way before that. She was in there loading a cargo of apples. There's a huge, big orchard up there. I remember I used to hunt pheasants in the thing. Come on down the lake on a tow, took the light boat, and stop it, go ashore. The Oaks I

remember seeing run a lot, because I used to paddle around out here in waves. She made a hell of a wave. And, I'm not sure, I don't think I ever saw the Idaho.

DB: What would the last date for the paddlewheel passenger excursion boats be, would you guess? Was it in the '30s?

FM: There was no paddlewheels running then, I'm quite sure...I'm not absolutely positive...there were no paddlewheels when I started steamboating. There was the Flyer running. Of course, the Harrison run after that, just a short couple trips.

~~DB: And, so it be 1932...or '28?~~

FM: Probably, before that.

DB: '28?

FM: Really, I can't keep...it's so far back, it just doesn't come out. And, I have to base this on what boat I was on, or something else, to try to get a time limit for you.

DB: You started when you were 16 and you worked for the Coeur d'Alene Mill. How long did you work for them, and then, who did you work for after that?

FM: Well, after the Coeur d'Alene Mill, then I went under the Lafferty boats. And, I run their boats for quite a few years. And then, and then when I got married, I decided that instead of living out on a tugboat, I had that nice young gal I didn't want to be too far away, you know. So, then I quit and got my own little boats, so I could stay home. I bought myself a nice five room float house.

DB: So you have been self-employed ever since?

FM: Oh yes.

DB: That would have been 45 years ago.

FM: Well, yes. Well, during World War II, I did go back to work for a few months. To help them out when they were in desperate need of someone who knew what they were doing.

DB: What kind of work were you doing for the war effort, back then?

FM: Handling logs in the saw mills. I asked the draft board one time, after the war was over, how come you didn't draft...of course, they couldn't have anyway, I had a broken back and the hands were chopped up...but I says--how come you never tried to draft me. And they says, they said--these lumber companies wouldn't have stood for it. You're the only guy around here who knows the log stores from any company, and you know what they need to have done. Believe me, they worked the hell out of me, I had to...every once in a while...I had to go from the lake and crawl in a bunk to get two hours of sleep.

DB: What kinds of work have you done over the last 45 years, in terms of your own private business? What kind of towing have you done with your tugs?

FM: Everything. About five years ago--four years ago, I guess it was--I got out of the log towing. I do some yet, but not much. Most of the towing I do now is for my own

business. Then I swung clear into marine construction. Pile driving. I work for all these mills. I drive many, many, many, in fact I think I drive 90% of the pilings. And then I build 100s and 100s of docks, for shoreline people. And I do barging. I barged sand, gravel, lumber, machinery equipment, whatever is necessary.

DB: Where do the barges come from?

FM: Well, my largest barge, I have, it'd carry just under 100 tons. And I bought it down at Coolee Dam; it's a steel barge. It's a segmented barge, and I just took it apart, and moved it up here.

DB: When you move lumber do you move it in booms, or...?

FM: No. On the deck.

DB: On the deck? With the old kind of booms, what kinds of booms did they used to have?

FM: Do you mean lumber or logs?

DB: Logs. I guess I mean logs.

FM: Yea. Well, that's...they're all in booms. Now most of them are bundled. Great big, they'll bring a whole big truckload in, and then they put these steel straps around them.

DB: How many to a bundle?

FM: Oh, average, I think, about 8,000 feet.

DB: How many logs would that be?

FM: Depends on the size. The average log--a 32 foot log--would probably be about, oh, five...thousand.

DB: Did they way they used to boom the logs, in the old days, was that any different then they boom them now, except for the cables around them?

FM: No different, except we didn't bundle them. They were free floating logs. And, the reason that they have to do it this way, the Forest Service got so stinking, then they make you bring out junk, whether it was any good or not. And, in those days they left...if they fall a tree and they had a shaky butt on it, or something like that, they'd saw it off and leave it in the woods. But they won't let them do that. So, if you bring that shaky butt in, in the log without banding it, it will sink. That's one of the reasons. Another reason, you can put 8,000 in a bundle, it doesn't take up much room, for your log storage.

DB: To make the periphery of a boom, how would they attach the logs together?

FM: Well, you had boom sticks. Ah, a boom stick is generally long...they're 30 to 40 feet long. They are all coupled together with chains. You corral them, just like you corral your cows or anything, and couple them up and hook in to them.

DB: Did they ever use trail dogs?

FM: No,no--that's in the woods.

DB: But they never used them to boom?

FM: Oh, I use them yet today, when I put a boom together at St. Maries, of cedar stuff. Instead of taking chains and boring holes I use trail dogs just to make my outside boom. Then I cable everything. I built a raft, then I load on top of it. It's all cedar. I'll build a raft, maybe 200-250 feet long, then I'll have the crane just load on top of these cables, and then I build my boat right in the back end. Yea, just like a long boat.

DB: How did you used to do it, back in the old days, same way?

FM: No. I am the only person who's ever done that. You put 'em in a boom and put lines across them.

DB: Could you draw a picture?

FM: Yea.

DB: Why don't you do it on this paper here?

FM: I draw more pictures on napkins than anything else.

DB: Now, to bring a boom of logs out of the river, you shape them up like this. Then you put lines across them. They were about 100 foot lines. About every, 60-70 feet.

DB: Those are steel cables?

FM: No. They are generally, about 3/4 inch manila or poly-prop, or something like that. And, then when you get down on the lake, you just trip these lines, take them off. Then you got all these sticks out here, then you got a little bit of a bag back here with the logs in it. Like that. When you run in and round them off. Takes that much more to make them that long, you see. Then in the lake they'll put, maybe 10, 12 of these rails into one of these booms, and make it like this. Then they'll hook into it and take it down to the lake.

DB: How many logs can...how many booms attached like that, could a tug carry?

FM: Well. The old steamers used to figure if they had...well, I know one steamer come down with eleven million feet, but that was probably the biggest tow ever brought down.

DB: When you say, "come down", what do you mean?

FM: Down from the upper end of the lake. After they tow them on the rivers and make them into these booms, then they throw them down here, and they put them in log storages. But...

DB: Would that be in the water or up...?

FM: No, no. They are in the water. Log storages that's, you can see them right over there. The piling and the boot logs. And then in the winter they go in, half a million feet, they round 'em out, take them from there.

DB: Did you ever do any logging yourself, out in the woods?

FM: No. No. All my work has been right on the water like when I did all the water works for the Worlds Fair, when they set that up. Stages, floating stages, floating fireworks, and all that stuff. There was Tommy Walker. All the entertainment for the Worlds Fair; he is the one I deal

with. We got done a little ahead of time. "Fred" he said, "Can you come up and do some work up on land?" I says, "If I can dangle one toe on the river, I'll work for you; but otherwise I don't want to." So, that's been the story of my life. Most...just water work all the time.

DB: What's a typical day like in water working? When would you wake up, and go to work?

FM: Well, you mean, way it used to be or way it is now?

DB: How about used to be?

FM: Well, by God, when I started out on the steam boats, I got top wages. I got \$.50 an hour. And I didn't see any use in tying a steamboat up on the river bank, and go to bed. I'd run those things, 16, 17 hours a day. And, we'd be out from four in the morning, till we'd get tuckered out.

DB: When would you eat? What would you eat?

FM: We'd eat on the run. Typical day, in those days would be: tie your boat up, say, 10:30...10, 10:30 at night; and, I'd put in just enough fire so she'd have a little steam in the morning. Get up in the morning, throw in a little wood, build a fire in the cook-stove, and take off. Untie a ton, hook on, you got steam, then you cooked your breakfast on the way.

DB: What was the majority of your work, I mean would you be hauling log booms at that time?

FM: Log booms. See, they'd bring these logs by both rail and truck and when I first started, trucking was just, almost, starting. They didn't even have pneumatic tires, on the log trucks. They were all hard tires.

DB: Do a lot of bouncing.

FM: Well, they couldn't go over seven miles--eight miles--an hour, at the most, you know. And, of course, the old hard tires had no traction. The old Macks, and the old Whites, Republics, and things like that. And then they had a steam donkey up these hills, and they'd hook on to 'em and pull them up the hill, and put a load on them, then they'd hook the donkey on to let them down, because they had no brakes, only had rear brakes, you know. Things like that.

DB: Did...?

FM: Sure differed.

DB: Were there ever any chutes or flumes that emptied logs out on the Coeur d'Alene?

FM: You bet. Not the Coeur d'Alene, but up on the St. Joe River; there on Coeur d'Alene Lake there was many chutes, in the old days. By Harrison.

DB: Was that when you were working up there?

FM: Yea. I used to see 'em come down, yes.

DB: And, then how would they boom them up, once they got to them?

FM: Well. They'd have a pocket down there. The chute comes down off the hill, and sometimes those things would be flaming, when they hit the water.

DB: Flaming?

FM: Yea. From friction.

DB: Friction?

FM: And, then they'd have these big goose-necks...and they'd just...oh mountains of logs.

(END OF TAPE 6; Side 1)
